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Tyndale University College and Seminary

An Action Research Exploration of Leadership Formation
Among the Ahtna That Resulted in the Discovery of Factors
Encouraging the Emergence of Indigenous Christian Leaders

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for the degree of
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by

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Toronto, Canada

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ABSTRACT

This project examined the leadership development process from several perspectives. First, a theological study of the concepts of spiritual and cultural identity provided the biblical basis for these foundational aspects of a leader's life. Second, the concept of cultural identity was also examined from a System Theory perspective, including a description of and the need for well-differentiated leadership. Finally, using Action Research as a methodology, the project explored cultural fundamentals of leadership among the Ahtna people of south-central Alaska, searching for perspectives and practices already embedded in the Ahtna culture that would serve as the foundation for Christian leadership development.

Emerging from the project are factors that encourage the development of leaders in a culturally appropriate way. These include (1) an understanding of the concept of leadership in a given cultural context, (2) the critical role of culture and community in the leadership formation process, (3) recognition and response to cataclysmic experiences, and (4) the importance of faith and a developing sense of spiritual identity. Furthermore, the research demonstrated the pivotal place of mentoring in the formation of leaders through the experience of planning and carrying out a mentoring event for young men. These outcomes provided markers on the journey toward culturally relevant and biblically based formation of local church leadership.

DEDICATION

In no way could this program and project have been completed without the incredible love, support and wisdom of my wife Ruth. Life and ministry has always been a team effort and this project was no exception. Ruth, you always seek my best and bring out my best. My name might be on the title page of the project, but your heart and soul are woven through its pages.

In large measure my model for ministry will always be my parents, Leander and Louise Rempel, whose lives have touched so many people. This project stands on their shoulders, and hopefully in some small way is a tribute to their life of sacrifice and service.

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The Kaladi Klub—I couldn't have done it without you!

This project would not exist without the participation of many friends among the Ahtna people. I see God at work in so many ways among you. "And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns." Philippians 1:6

I am grateful to my colleagues at SEND North for encouraging me to see this project through to completion.

The patience, support and encouragement of my family always put fuel in my tank when it was running low. What a powerful expression of God's grace!

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CHAPTER 1

PROJECT CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW

And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them. (Psalm 78:72 NIV).

In its many cultural forms, leadership exercises influence and provides inspiration. Although the function and characteristics may vary according to context, leadership forms an integral part of human existence. Whether on the macro level of cities, countries and empires, or in the context of a family, club, or school, the well-being—or lack of it—of any relational system is often attributed to the quality of its leadership. The same can be said for church ministry. The development of sound leadership represents one of the key components to enduring fruitfulness (Malphurs and Mancini 2004, 10). The New Testament demonstrates that not only did the Apostles develop into leaders, they also took great care in establishing local church leadership (Acts 6:1-7, 14:23; 1 Tim. 3:1-13; 1 Peter 5:2).

Any leadership development process presents challenges. However, crossing cultural boundaries while seeking to facilitate the spiritual growth of individuals and churches heightens the difficulty of the task. What does leadership in a given cultural context look like? How should biblical principles of leadership be applied in a culturally relevant way? Considering the many difficulties inherent

in cross-cultural ministry, missionary author James Plueddemann asserts, “High on the list of misunderstandings is a clash of culturally diverse leadership values and styles” (Plueddemann 2009, 11).

This challenge underscores the need to discover cultural values and fundamentals of leadership before engaging in the task of developing leaders. Plueddemann’s assertion points to the frustration in pursuing leadership formation in a style foreign to the host context. Therefore, a critical first step is to gain an understanding of the leadership patterns already embedded within the culture, patterns that will have far reaching implications for nearly every aspect of Christian ministry.

Project Objectives and Description

This Action Research (AR) project sought to uncover cultural fundamentals of leadership among the Ahtna people of south-central Alaska by focusing on the following objectives: (1) to gain an Ahtna understanding of the concept of leadership, (2) to discern obstacles to the leadership formation process, and (3) to shed light on pathways to leadership among the Ahtna people. In accomplishing these objectives, my purpose was to discover perspectives and practices already embedded in the Ahtna culture that could serve as the foundation for a biblically sound and culturally relevant leadership development model.

Action Research—A Brief Description

As more fully described in Chapter 4, Action Research (AR) provided the methodological foundation for this project. AR practitioner and author Ernest Stringer states that, “Action research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives” (Stringer 2007, 1). Three characteristics define AR. First it is a cyclical process. “The research process is the developmental process of following through the idea, seeing how it goes, and continually checking whether it is in line with what you wish to happen” (McNiff 2002, 2). As a result, this AR project placed significant emphasis on building and growing relationships in order to complete several cycles of investigation, learning, and evaluation. Second it is a highly collaborative process. Rather than treating people as research subjects, AR enables people to explore a given issue in their context in search of a solution or a better way to achieve their goals and a means for development. Third, AR focuses on change. It seeks “to arrive at recommendations for good practice that will tackle a problem or enhance the performance of the organization and individuals...” (Bell 2006, 8).

Chapter 4 provides the details of the research process. The project used Stringers’ AR model that consists of three cycles: Look, Think, Act. “Look” involves gathering information and building a description of what is happening; “Think” includes both analysis and interpretation of what has been observed; “Act” focuses on planning, implementation, and evaluation (Stringer 2007, 8). In each cycle the research process involved various methods including Interview,

Appreciative Inquiry, and Cooperative Inquiry. The first AR cycle focused on interviews of individuals holding leadership positions within the community. Each conversation included the question “Who else do you think I should talk to about this?” which led to further interviews. Flowing from this first round of interviews, the research was split into two tracks, one which became known as the Origins group with the other labeled as the Community group. Each group worked through Stringer’s model—Look, Think, Act—using the variety of methods listed above. The final AR cycle consisted of the Origins group staging a leadership mentoring event designed to embark on the journey toward culturally relevant leadership formation. This three-day wilderness camp experience included outdoor activities as well as time for group discussion over a wide range of topics. It also enabled Origins group members to begin the mentoring process with young men from the Ahtna community.

Project Scope

The scope of the project determines its boundaries, what it did and did not include. First, this research focused on the concept of spiritual and cultural identity being fundamental components of leadership (Chapter 2). If leadership in its most basic form may be defined as influence, the core identity of the influencer takes on critical importance. Ultimately, an individual cannot lead/influence in a way incongruous with his/her identity. The foundation and starting point for the Christian leader, from a biblical perspective, must rest in their identity in Christ. Thus, in Chapter 2, the project research included a study of biblical examples of

leaders exercising their influence as an expression or extension of their relationship to God. In his descriptive teaching on fruit-bearing and connectedness in John 15, Christ succinctly states, "...apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5 NLT). Admittedly the matter of spiritual identity has been well-researched and discussed; it is not an unfamiliar topic, at least from a cognitive perspective, for those engaged in Christian ministry. In contrast, my own life experience along with the observation of others would seem to indicate that frequently followers of Christ do not live or lead from this foundation of spiritual identity. As a result, I considered this issue to be of fundamental importance to the project.

Beyond the spiritual identity of a leader, a theological perspective of cultural identity is also explored in Chapter 2. Just as people cannot lead in a manner incongruous to their spiritual foundation, it also holds true that individuals will most naturally develop and lead in harmony with their cultural perspective. This principle carries significant implications. There seems to be no shortage of leadership development opportunities in North America, yet the project research and personal experience demonstrate a lack of developing Christian leadership among the Ahtna and other aboriginal people groups in Alaska. What factors have caused this dearth of leaders? How can these issues be overcome? Throughout this project, I sought to answer these questions in terms of negative barriers inhibiting leadership growth as well as potential cultural pathways that would facilitate leadership development. Addressing this issue from a setting outside North America, author Philip Jenkins cites film maker James Ault's perspective

on the link between faith and culture: “Christianity’s explosive growth in Africa depends upon the powerful and inexorable process of believers’ rooting their faith more authentically in their own culture” (Ault in Jenkins 2013, 80). Leadership flows from one’s identity. It would be counter-productive to model or teach leadership from an outside set of cultural values, implicitly requiring the growing leader to live and act outside their own cultural identity. Examining the matter another way, what does culturally relevant leadership look like in a people group? How does it develop? With these questions in mind, exploring principles of spiritual and cultural identity as they relate to leadership development formed part of the foundation of this project (Chapter 2).

A second aspect of this study focused on system thinking (see Chapter 3). “System thinking considers the interrelatedness of the parts. Instead of seeing isolated, unrelated parts, we look at the whole” (Steinke 2006, 3). Relational networks (or systems) whether big or small do not function in a simple mechanistic, cause and effect manner. Rather, the system becomes an expression of the ongoing interaction and interdependence of the various parts. “System theory focuses attention on how interactions are mutually influenced and how they become patterned or repeated” (Steinke 2006, 6). A basic definition of leadership as “influence” implies an understanding that a leader forms part of what is likely to be multiple systems (Richardson 1996, 26). Therefore a discussion of leadership, its function, and development, should include an exploration and application of system thinking. A leader, by understanding relational patterns and issues, can bring about positive change and growth. “One

of the keys to functioning in a healthy manner as a church is for the leaders to look at the church as a system rather than as a collection of isolated people” (Richardson 1996, 26).

In the early stages of this project, applying system thinking concepts led to a change in perspective regarding leadership formation within the local church. Given the interrelatedness between the church context and the greater Ahtna community, I thought it necessary to broaden the scope of the investigation to consider the matter of leadership formation within the entire system. As a result, while the project remained founded on a biblical concept of leadership, the research grew beyond the walls of a specific local church. Instead, it expanded to consider factors and issues in a broader community context in order to gain a more complete picture of the Ahtna culture.

System thinking also led to a deeper exploration of the concept of self-differentiation, and its relationship to leadership development in Chapter 3. Family therapist Edwin Friedman defines differentiation as “the lifelong process of striving to keep one’s being in balance through the reciprocal external and internal processes of self-definition and self-regulation” (Friedman 2007, 183). Friedman goes on to explain that this process should not be confused with notions of selfishness, self-centered behavior, or even independence. Just as a healthy cell in the human body is differentiated from other cells, functioning inter-dependently within an entire system, so too will the well-differentiated individual be clear about their own personal values and goals; understanding where one’s self ends and another begins is crucial for overall relationship development and

health (Friedman 2007, 183). At first glance, a Christian might argue that the idea of self-differentiation runs counter to biblical teaching. How can the importance of self be discussed when Scripture teaches that everyone is to die to self? Alistair Roberts highlights a distinction between the Christian and non-Christian leader:

The 'self' of the Christian leader ought to be defined differently from the 'self' of the non-Christian leader. Yet in both cases a well-defined self is crucial to leadership. The integrity of the Church and the people of God arises from Christ as their head. Consequently, all leadership must be founded upon a well-defined sense of the identity of Christ... (Roberts 2013b)

Bowen, Friedman, and others argue that successful leadership flows from those individuals who are able to maintain a well-defined self. Conversely, when seen from a negative perspective, a lack of well-differentiated leadership is demonstrated when leaders (1) lack the distance to think out their vision clearly, (2) are led hither and yon by crisis after crisis, and (3) are reluctant to take well-defined stands—if they have any convictions at all (Friedman 2007, 89).

What is the connection between the concept of self-differentiated leadership and the development of Christian leaders among Native Alaskans? Although not a principle focus of this study, as a partial answer to this question the cultural impact and disruption of life brought about by Anglo-European exploration and settlement in Alaska must be considered. Alaskan author Ronald Simpson writes:

The cultural shock which hit the Ahtna Natives with the advent of the white prospectors from the Valdez-Klutina Glacier trek in 1898-99, with the coming of the railroad in 1909-11, and with the Chisana gold rush of 1913, is well documented. The clash of the two cultures reverberates to this day, largely at the expense of the rural Natives. (Simpson 2001, 17)

To apply Friedman's analogy, the healthy cell of Native culture and society has been completely disrupted by an invasive organism. Life, language, community, education, and leadership all have undergone massive, and at times devastating, change. Furthermore, on a more local level the Ahtna people have experienced tremendous societal change as described in Chapter 5. In the midst of this upheaval, churches and mission organizations have sounded the call for the development of aboriginal church leadership. Has what a well-differentiated Alaskan Native leader looks like within his/her own culture even been considered? An important first step would be to describe the characteristics that define such a leader, and then go on to determine how these qualities might be fostered and encouraged.

Given the scope of the research, what did the project not include? This project was not another leadership development program. Not only would a fully developed program go far beyond the scope of this study; in many ways, it would miss the point of the project. No shortage of leadership development options exists within the North American milieu of academic and ministry preparation either in or out of Alaska. Retired Bible college president Dr. Robert Lee, a former leader of one such program, sheds light on this matter by describing a typical scenario. Potential Native leaders go away to be trained at a formal institution. They return, only to come back and find that a wall has now been erected between them and their own people, thus rendering their leadership largely ineffective (Robert Lee, January 7, 2012, email message to author). Lee's

observation underscores the importance of stepping back from program development in order to consider the deeper cultural context and issues.

Second, the project did not assume a “one size fits all” solution for leadership development among North American Native people. Culturally and geographically, it is limited to a relatively small area and people group in Alaska. If leadership is the exercise of influence over others, the manner in which it is carried out is dependent on the cultural setting. For example, I may conceive ideal church leadership to look a certain way based on my cultural perspective by interpreting and applying Scripture according to my worldview. As a result, my biblical leadership model fits my own cultural norms and context. The danger lies in considering my model as the standard that should apply in every situation. In contrast, this project sought a different path toward leadership formation, one that is both true to biblical standards and also culturally relevant to a specific context. Therefore, rather than bringing a solution and providing answers to leadership development questions, I endeavored to ask the right questions in order to set out upon a journey toward leadership formation.

This project was not meant to be a formulaic program, guiding a given group through a static process. Rather, in keeping with AR principles, it demonstrated a more dynamic nature, flexing and growing to fit the needs of the group. Not only did this allow the discussion of leadership development to be more culturally relevant, but also more accurately reflective of life itself. System thinking would tell us that relationship, growth, and change do not occur mechanically as a simple cause and effect process. Yet, people may inadvertently

assume leadership development to be a simple matter of input and outcome. In light of this, the project endeavored to move toward a specific goal—discovering fundamentals of leadership—in ways that fit the context of this particular group.

Ministry and Project Context

The setting for the project found its source from within my ministry environment. It also included a significant portion of my life journey. I am the Area Director for SEND North, an organization dedicated to spreading the life-transforming message of salvation through Jesus Christ to the various people groups within the 60/70 Window. I use this term to describe the territory roughly bounded by the 60 and 70 degree parallels bounded by Alaska in the West and stretching eastward to Greenland. SEND North, the organization in which I serve, forms a part of SEND International, an evangelical mission community made up of over 500 individuals committed to mobilizing God's people for the task of engaging the unreached in order to establish reproducing churches. Ministry in Alaska began under the direction of Vince Joy, a pioneer missionary who founded Central Alaskan Missions. Through an organizational merger, the group would later become SEND North and function as part of the outreach of SEND International.

Currently, nearly 90 missionaries are engaged in church planting and evangelism in wide array of communities from Hooper Bay on the west coast of Alaska to Yellowknife, NWT. My role is to provide overall strategic leadership to the ministry of SEND North, including the exploration and development of new

ministry areas, as well as logistically facilitating the ministry of teams and individuals. Although the context may vary somewhat from place to place, SEND North team members seek to make disciples and gather them into local groups of established followers of Christ.

The context of the project also included a significant portion of my personal journey. Some of what may be described as my earliest ministry memories came from watching my parents fulfill their calling as missionaries among the Ahtna people of the Copper Valley. Located in eastern Alaska, the Copper Valley, or Copper River Basin, encompasses approximately 21,000 square miles and is bounded by the Chugach National Forest to the south, the Alaska Range to the north, and the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve to the east, and the Talkeetna and Chugach Mountains to the west. The region includes the Wrangell and St. Elias Mountain Range, which has nine of the 16 highest mountain peaks in North America (Greater Copper Valley Chamber of Commerce 2014). This region is home to the Ahtna people, an Athabascan tribe which numbers over 1700 members today, many of whom still live in one of the eight traditional villages in the area (Ahtna Inc 2013). Largely because of their history with the ministry of SEND North, two of the communities, Gulkana (pop. 119) and Copper Center (pop. 328), became a specific focus in this project.

As I observed my parents' ministry with the people of this region, I did not understand all that transpired. I saw lives being transformed by the Gospel and churches in the process of formation, but I also witnessed the despair and devastation that sin brings to an individual life, a family, or even an entire

community. For better or worse, local leadership played an integral part of this process. At times local churches flourished under the blessing of effective leadership; I also noticed that ministries floundered or even disappeared largely due to a lack of leadership. The Apostle Paul's words about spiritual battle and struggle took on real meaning for me. Decades later, after having served in a variety of ministry contexts and cultures, I have followed God's call and become a leader with SEND North.

Although the scope of my ministry has moved far beyond the Copper Valley, the opportunity and challenge of leadership development persists. The importance of leadership formation is a frequent topic of discussion in my ministry setting. From personal observation, the discussion often revolves around this perplexing question: Why has Native church leadership development not flourished in Alaska? For example, a 2012 mission conference held in Anchorage listed Church Leadership Development as a workshop option. However, the workshop was cancelled because the two veteran missionaries slated to lead the discussion declared they had never seen sufficient leadership development take place in order to speak to the matter. This anecdotal evidence begins to highlight the importance of the words I heard spoken with conviction at a First Nations church conference: "Strong Native churches require strong Native leaders." This emphatic declaration made me begin to ask how to better facilitate the formation of Native Christian leaders. Is everything possible being done, and the process simply happening in the Lord's time? Could there be better ways to address this need? In order to explore this issue more thoroughly, given my life experience

and the relational nature of AR, I considered it logical to return to my family and ministry roots in the Copper Valley.

The ministry of Central Alaskan Mission (now SEND North) among the Ahtna people began in 1937, and along with other ministries, resulted in the establishment of churches in the communities of Gulkana and Copper Center. As a result of ongoing discipleship training efforts in the 1950s and 60s, four Ahtna pastors emerged as leaders in these two communities: Fred Ewan, Harry Johns, Jim McKinley, and Ben Neeley. Although Johns, McKinley, and Neeley have died and are in the presence of the Lord, Ewan still serves his people in the role of Traditional Chief. It is perplexing to note that since the four pastors mentioned retired from active ministry, very few Ahtna Christian leaders—at least in a recognized, positional sense—have emerged. A few individuals have received formal Bible training at the undergraduate level, and several have served in the role of church elder. The churches in Gulkana and Copper Center were established with a biblical leadership structure, including a pastor and a board of elders. Yet following the ministry of the four men previously mentioned, neither church nor any other local congregation has ever been pastored by Ahtna leadership. This apparent multi-decade gap in local Christian leadership also forms part of the context and impetus for the research. The project sought to understand the factors that led to the current situation, and to discern possible avenues for growth and change.

For purposes of clarification, it should be understood that while “First Nations,” “Inuit,” and “Métis” are terms used to describe various aboriginal

groups in Canada, Alaskan aboriginal people use the generic term “Native” to describe themselves, as in “The Alaskan Federation of Natives.” Given the setting of this project, “Native” is the terminology which will be used.

Project Outcomes and Conclusions

The research outcomes and conclusions, briefly summarized here, will be fully described in Chapters 5 and 6. First, I discovered that service in the context of community forms the foundation of an Ahtna description of leadership. A person’s education, employment or title was of little consequence. Rather, the consistent picture emerging from the research points to leadership founded on character-based service to the community. In the Ahtna context, an individual exercises leadership by modeling a life of wisdom and in turn offering that guidance to others. A second research outcome highlighted the role of community and cultural identity in leadership development. Connectedness and interaction with the community consistently marked the participants’ description of leaders, past and present. Closely related to the role of the community is the concept of cultural identity. The project findings demonstrated the critical role of an individual’s cultural identity. A third research finding revealed the occurrence and effect of cataclysmic experiences as obstacles to leadership formation. A cataclysm may be defined as “a violent upheaval, especially of a political, military or social nature” (Collins World English Dictionary, s.v. “cataclysm”). The Ahtna have experienced social upheaval in at least three ways: (1) the effects of alcohol and substance abuse, (2) the sudden influx of money during the construction of

the Trans-Alaska pipeline, and (3) sexual abuse at the hands of church and other religious leaders as something that brought upheaval to the Alaskan Native community at large. These events or experiences have impacted the formation of leaders among the Ahtna and must be taken into account when considering the matter of leadership development. Finally, the project brought to light the link between leadership and faith. Research participants often spoke of the two in close relationship to one another by describing examples of faith-centered leadership in the past and present. This connection between faith and leadership was affirmed in Chapter 2 through the study of biblical instruction regarding the formation of an individual's spiritual identity.

The research outcomes led to the conclusions and implications for ministry described in Chapter 6. In considering the leadership development process in any cultural context, a fundamental starting point is to grasp the group's perspective on leadership. Missionary author James Plueddemann calls attention to the need for clarity in this matter even while recognizing the difficulty in defining the concept of leadership when crossing cultural boundaries (Plueddemann 2009, 94). As explained in Chapter 6, a group's perspective on leadership carries implications for effective Christian ministry. Further project conclusions focused on how to foster a sense of cultural identity within emerging leaders, the need to enhance the role of women in leadership, and steps needed to counter the impact of cataclysmic experiences.

Each of the research conclusions mentioned above highlight the role of mentoring in the leadership formation process. "Learn by watching an older

leader,” would be an apt summary of an Ahtna perspective on the matter. Not only does the mentoring process encompass the Ahtna concept of leadership, if done adequately it would answer the need for a strengthened spiritual and cultural identity in both men and women, leading to the growth of self-differentiated leaders. The project discovered that, although the community is currently experiencing difficulty in this area, there is potential to re-ignite the process as evidenced by the Origins group. Those involved in Christian ministry could serve as catalysts for this growth by seeking to equip others for leadership rather than simply doing the work themselves.

Action Research focuses on change. “If an Action Research project does not *make a difference*, in a specific way, for practitioners and/or their clients, then it has failed to achieve its objective” (Stringer 2007, 12). This project brought about change in at least three areas described in greater detail in Chapter 6. On a personal level, my life has been enriched through the relationships developed over the course of the project while my understanding of leadership formation has been deepened. In terms of ministry I have gained experience with methods, including AR itself, which I believe will bear fruit in the work of SEND North and beyond. I have also seen change and growth among the Ahtna participants in the project who experienced a mentoring process in a new way. In summary, not only did I desire to grow in my personal leadership ability as a result of the study and research involved in this project, but I sought to facilitate the growth and development of leadership gifts in others. By God’s grace the project accomplished these goals.

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE

Scripture demonstrates that the growth and development of godly leaders includes living with a deepening understanding of their identity with God while also remaining rooted in their cultural context. In this chapter I will develop this theme by (1) exploring biblical teaching regarding spiritual identity, (2) examining four examples of biblical leadership, (3) discussing the relationship between God and human culture, and (4) discovering the implications for Christian leadership as illustrated by the Apostle Paul. Leadership author Carson Pue affirms that a leader must have a clear understanding of his/her identity as a child of God. “Without that, we become like reeds blowing in the wind” (Pue 2005, 39). Not only does Scripture point to the fundamental nature of a believer’s spiritual identity, but it also illustrates examples of how this identity shapes and guides leaders from the earliest stages of their development. As Pue indicates, ignoring this critical aspect of life has serious consequences. One’s identity also includes the cultural context, which is another important aspect of God’s handiwork in an individual’s life. As biblical teaching and examples explain, these two fundamental aspects of life—spiritual and cultural identity—are not incongruous. Rather, they conjointly form the foundation of biblical leadership.

Biblical Leadership Foundation: Spiritual Identity

The term “identity” refers to the set of characteristics by which a person or thing is definitively recognizable or known (Collins World English Dictionary, s.v. “identity”). Speaking specifically of “spiritual identity” further refines this concept by focusing on the foundation of one’s existence as a spiritual being. Although human existence may be viewed from various perspectives, Christian philosopher Dallas Willard argues that ultimately life only has significance when understood from a divine perspective. “Our human life, it turns out, is not destroyed by God’s life but is fulfilled in it and in it alone. The obviously well-kept secret of the ‘ordinary’ is that it is made to be a receptacle of the Divine, a place where the life of God flows” (Willard 1998, 14). As a result, a life lived as God intended—and therefore any leadership that results from such a life—must rise from an understanding of one’s spiritual identity.

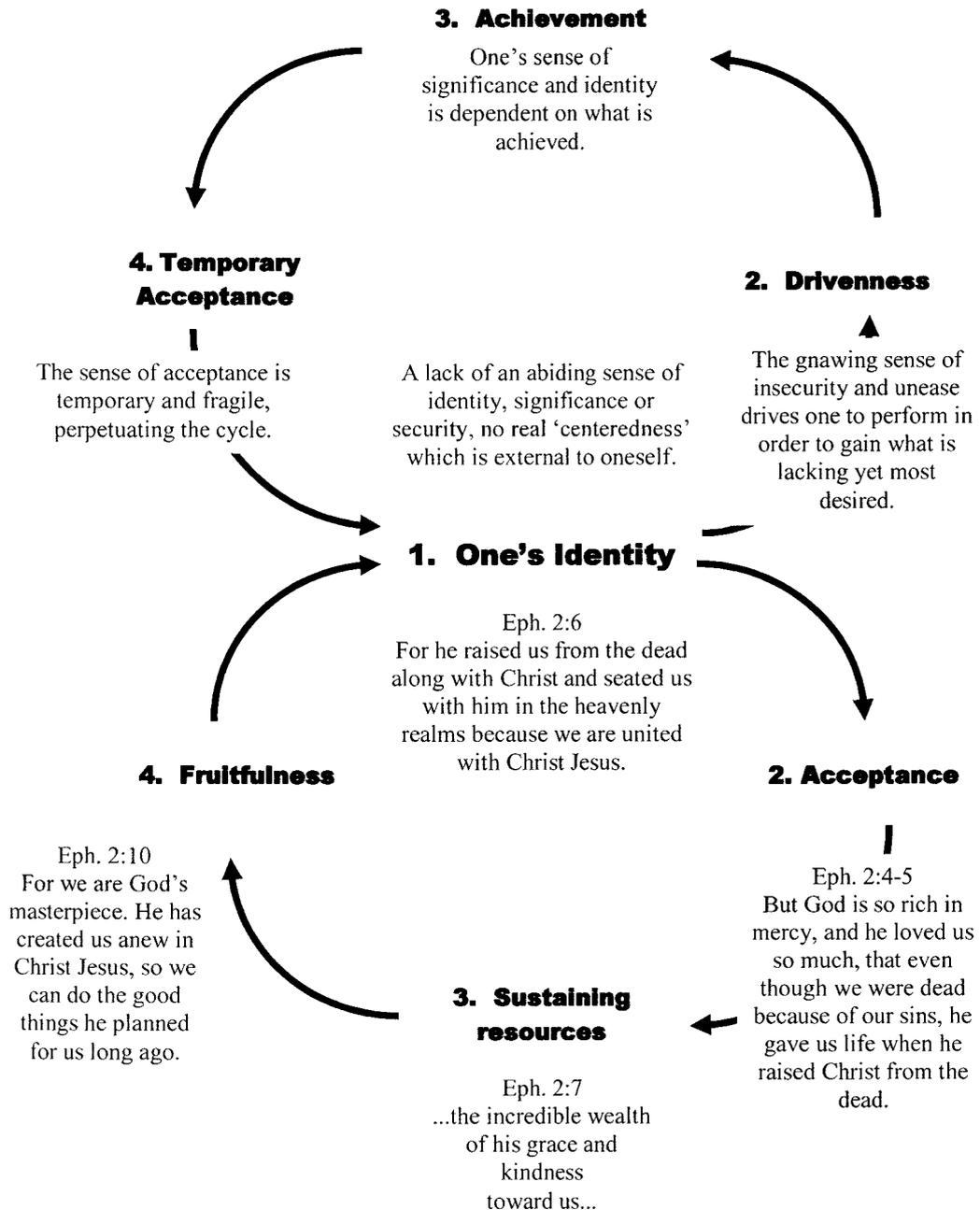
Biblical Rationale

Our identity as a receptacle of the Divine stems from God’s activity as Creator. Scripture describes the act of creation as a breathtaking wonder of joyous activity (Job 38:4-7). “How do we begin to describe this God whose image we bear? *Artistic* is the only word that even comes close” (Eldredge 2000, 147). As the culmination of God’s creative activity, He created human beings, male and female, in His own image (Gen. 1:27). “This is the core of the likeness or image of God in us... We are, all of us, never-ceasing spiritual beings with a unique eternal calling to count for good in God’s great universe” (Willard 1998, 21). In a

limited way, something of this truth can be understood through the analogy of an inventor's intimate knowledge of their creation or a parent's understanding of the gifts and talents exhibited in a child's life. In both cases, there exists an intense desire to see the creation fulfill its full potential. Likewise, people are created with identity, purpose, and significance which cannot successfully be separated from their relationship to God.

It lies outside the scope of this work to fully discuss the effect of sin on God's creation. Likewise, God's plan for redemption cannot be fully explored. That said, the work of Christ on the cross must be considered as it relates to the matter of identity. Pue underscores the importance of understanding our identity as a child of God, and then adds, "When we become a follower of Jesus...we become joint heirs of his kingdom. We are from that moment on daughters and sons of the King...We can never partake in the fullness of God without being in relationship to Jesus" (Pue 2005, 38). His words echo those of the Apostle Paul who writes that in Christ a person is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), complete in Christ (Col. 2:10), a joint heir with Christ (Rom. 8:17), and a citizen of heaven (Phil. 3:20). "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago" (Eph. 2:10 NLT). The following diagram highlights the difference in perspective and outcome when one understands and lives within their identity in Christ.

Cycle of Performance-Based Life & Ministry



Cycle of Grace-Based Life & Ministry

Figure 1. Cycles of Performance and Grace. Adapted from Lawrence 2004.

As illustrated in figure 1, one's identity represents the critical starting point. If not founded on the Creator God's purposes, identity becomes a mix of the individual's own perspective and the perception of what others expect or demand—in a word, performance (Pankau, Leach and Donovan 2010, 60). The cycle continues as the individual is compelled or driven to perform, striving for achievement in order to gain a precarious and temporary acceptance by self and/or others. However, since the level of acceptance (and thus one's identity) is based on performance, the cycle must be continually repeated.

How different the cycle of grace. An identity rooted in Christ finds rest in His acceptance and enjoys the resources He provides. As John 15 states, success or fruitfulness in life stems from divine grace and power. It must be noted that neither cycle represents a singular event, but rather a life pattern that develops over time. Anxiety and motivation decrease as an individual matures in their sense of spiritual identity, while at the same time leading to a greater sense of inner peace (Pue 2005, 40). (See discussion of Friedman's concept of anxiety in Chapter 3).

Abiding in Christ—John 15

Jesus' teaching in John 15 presents another compelling illustration of the biblical truth regarding the believer's identity and vital relationship to Christ. He begins with words that would certainly have captured the attention of His Jewish audience: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener" (John 15:1 NLT). On numerous occasions in the Old Testament God referred to Israel as the vine,

only to have them repeatedly sever their relationship with Him (Is. 5:1-7; Jer. 2:2; Ezek. 15; 17:5-10; Hos. 10:1). Through disobedience, Israel demonstrated a desire to pursue life disconnected from the Creator of life, seeking rather a shadow or pseudo-identity. This led to the Vine (Israel) becoming disconnected from the Source of Life, left to wither and be cast aside (Blum 1983, 325). Similarly as individuals there can be no life or vitality apart from the Creator. “However unlikely it may seem from our current viewpoint, God equipped us...by framing our nature to function in a conscious, personal relationship of interactive responsibility with him” (Willard 1998, 22). The completeness or fullness of our created selves cannot be experienced outside of being connected with our Creator.

Christ’s words in John, while alluding to Israel’s history, give new meaning to the Old Testament agricultural analogy. He is now the true Vine, and his followers are the branches (John 15:5). Life, identity, purpose, and fruitfulness are all found in Him: “...for apart from me [Jesus] you can do nothing” (John 15:5 NLT). Fruitfulness in life and ministry must not be considered in terms of human resources, gifts, talents, and achievements. Rather, significance is found through connectedness to the Vine. “[W]hen the believer relies completely and continuously upon his Savior and is obedient to His commands, then the life of Jesus inevitably flows into his life so that he can truly say with Paul ‘I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me’ (Gal. 2:20)” (Tasker 1983, 175). The truth of Christ’s teaching carries enormous implications for Christian leaders. “Abiding, staying attached, recognizing who is at the core of who you are and revolving your leadership around this core—that is what mature leaders do” (Pue 2005, 53).

This biblical teaching of the True Vine and branches, of connection and relationship, offers a solid foundation upon which a leader may grow and flourish.

There exists at least one danger worth briefly considering at this point: In a subtle yet egocentric, way, one could perhaps twist the matter of creation and identity, indeed all of Scripture, to think “It’s all about me, my role, my fulfillment, etc.” This is far from the truth.

...[A]n understanding of the mission of God as the very heartbeat of all reality, all creation, all history and all that yet lies ahead of us generates a distinctive worldview that is radically and transformingly God-centered...This worldview, constituted by putting the mission of God at the very center of all existence, is disturbingly subversive and it uncomfortably relativizes one’s own place in the grand scheme of things. (Wright 2006, 533)

God has been, is, and will be at work to redeem His creation for His glory.

Wright adds, “...[W]e should be seeing the purpose of all life, including our own, wrapped up in the great mission of God for the whole of creation” (Wright 2006, 534). As the biblical examples which follow illustrate, humanity’s role, whether exercising leadership or not, is one of being rooted in our God-given identity, maintaining a connection to the Vine, in order to do the good works God has prepared (Eph. 2:10).

A Leader’s Spiritual Identity

Numerous biblical examples bear witness to the principles discussed above worked out in the life of a leader. I will highlight four individuals: Moses, Jeremiah, David, and Jesus.

Moses

Even though He had been at work in Moses' life from the beginning, God's first direct interaction with this future leader of Israel is recorded in Exodus chapters 3-4. At the age of 80, Moses was working as a shepherd, having run to the wilderness to escape the wrath of Pharaoh (Ex. 2:15-25). Perhaps he assumed that God had forgotten him and the plight of his people, but that was far from the case (Ex. 2:24-25). God called out to Moses from a burning bush, directed him to become the leader of Israel and to deliver the people from bondage (Ex. 3:1-10). It is important to observe in the burning bush incident that God immediately set the identity foundation upon which Moses' leadership would be built: "I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Ex. 3:6, NLT). Although it was clear who was calling Moses into a leadership role, Moses had serious doubts about his own identity and worthiness in the face of such a daunting task (Ex. 3:11). God responds, not through encouragement or words of good cheer to Moses, but rather by reaffirming His own divine nature and the promise of His active presence (Ex. 3:12-22). Apparently, God's promises did not suffice for Moses. His objections continued, culminating in a plaintive cry that God send someone else (Ex. 4:1-17). To each objection, God responded by taking Moses' eyes off himself and putting the focus back on Himself: His nature, power, and action (Ex. 4:2-9, 11-12, 14-17).

What is to be learned from this divine leadership development encounter? First, although God would later use the significant skills and talents Moses had developed (Acts 7:22), the ultimate success of Moses' leadership would not rest

on these abilities. It would be his connection to God's enabling presence and power that would bring about the desired result: the rescue of God's enslaved people. There could be no successful separation of his identity as a leader from his relationship with the great I AM (Ex. 3:14). Second, the mission or goal of Moses' leadership was not of his choosing, but rather God's. It was God's plan and it was to be accomplished God's way.

He (Moses) found himself summoned to God's agenda, not his own. And the task to which he was summoned was one that seemed humanly impossible: to confront the most powerful ruler in the ancient Near East with a demand to 'Let my people go.' This public confrontation with the power of Egypt was not an ambition that Moses conceived on his own; rather, it was a result of hearing God's unforeseen call to imagine a new liberating possibility and to act in faith to bring it into reality. (Hays 2012, 6)

Moses' call to leadership, his ability to perform as a leader, and the task or focus of his leadership were all inextricably connected to his identity with God.

Jeremiah

We can see parallels to Moses' story in Jeremiah's call to ministry. God addresses the future prophet with a strong statement of identity and connection: "I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb. Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my spokesman to the world" (Jer. 1:4-5 NLT). There can be no doubt about the link between the Caller and the called. As in Moses' example, the task to which the prophet has been called as God's spokesman to the world is also vitally connected to Jeremiah's identity.

Once more, almost in an echo of Moses' response centuries earlier, the one called by God protests his inability to accomplish the task. In this case, Jeremiah blamed his youthfulness and an inability to speak adequately (Jer. 1:6). In the following verses (Jer. 1:7-10) the Sovereign LORD sweeps aside Jeremiah's misgivings with a three-fold reminder: (1) the prophet was not required to be an eloquent elder statesman, but rather a faithful messenger, (2) the prophet need not be afraid because God would rescue him, and (3) God would provide the words he would speak (Dyer 1983, 1130). Dissolving the link between Jeremiah, his ministry, and the One who commissioned him would be unthinkable. "The idea of a close, personal walk with God lies at the heart of Jeremiah's conception of being a prophet" (Cawley and Millard 1987, 628).

David

Given the above examples, the importance of the identity of the child of God might be perceived as something reserved only for an exclusive few or those chosen for a special leadership ministry. In contrast, David's words in Psalm 139 proclaim that God's intimate knowledge and connection with us goes beyond a call to a specific ministry and reaches to the deepest roots of life itself. The Psalm begins with a proclamation of God's deep knowledge of David's life: "O Lord, you have examined my heart and know everything about me" (Ps. 139:1 NLT). Actions, thoughts, and even words before they are spoken—all are known by God (Ps. 139:2-4). Furthermore, David recognizes that he cannot escape God's

presence, especially given that God's connection to him began before conscious life itself (Ps. 139:7-18).

Faced with the infinite knowledge, presence, and power of God, David might be expected to give up or surrender in abject defeat. Rather, he spontaneously bursts forth in praise. David concludes by fully offering himself to the God who laid claim on his life (Ps. 139:6, 14, 17, 23-24). David's rootedness in his identity with God gives us an example of one who finds both great comfort in God's character and motivation for service (Ross 1983, 893.)

Jesus

The fourth biblical illustration of an individual's identity and connection with God is an example which ties together the various elements mentioned in this chapter: the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3; Mark 1; Luke 3). If John's baptism signified repentance (Matt. 3:11), and Jesus was without sin (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15), why did he need to repent? Biblical scholar Louis Barbieri indicates that although Jesus' baptism could have been a symbolic confession of national sin, it more likely represents Jesus' complete identification with sinners. "It was therefore in the will of God for Him to be baptized by John in order to be identified (the real meaning of the word 'baptized') with sinners" (Barbieri 1983, 25).

Following the act of baptism, Scripture testifies that the heavens opened, the Spirit of God descended like a dove on Jesus and a voice from heaven declared, "You are my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with you" (Mark 1:11

NLT). Beyond the revealed presence of the Trinity, the strong statement of identity given by God the Father is noticeable. Commentators use words like “approval” (Barbieri 1983, 25), “acceptance” (Grassmick 1983, 104), and “bearing witness” (Swift 1987, 855) to describe this event. Fredrickson clearly states that “here the eternal relationship between Father and Son was revealed, an intimate union that is seen all through Jesus’ earthly ministry. The Son utterly depended upon the Father, and the Father abided in the Son” (Fredrickson 1986, 56). Jesus demonstrated the principle of connectedness and identity, a principle he later explains to His disciples in John 15. (See previous comments on this passage.) Obedience and service to God, including the exercise of leadership, cannot be properly conceived of outside of one’s spiritual identity.

God, Identity, and Culture

Beyond an individual’s spiritual identity with the Creator lies another aspect of relational existence: the cultural context in which one lives. Culture encompasses all aspects of life and has been described in the following way:

1. Language—the thread of the fabric of culture;
2. Social relationships—who they are as family, clan, nation and how they interact;
3. Religious understanding—cosmology, ceremonies, morals, taboos, written codes or Scriptures, or oral traditions;
4. Material products—objects, buildings, tools, weapons, implements produced;
5. Aesthetics—what is considered beautiful or pleasing in art, drama, dance, music, singing, etc.;
6. Environment/geographic setting—urban, suburban, rural, remote, arctic, maritime, island, continental, mountainous, etc. (Jacobs, Twiss and LeBlanc 2003, 7)

Culture forms an integral part of an individual's identity as well as defining the social context in which he/she lives. Missiologist Douglas Hayward explains, "...[W]e understand culture to be the sum total of all the beliefs, practices, and artifacts that a particular group of people adheres to and that facilitate their relationships to one another and to their environment" (Hayward 2003, 38). As I will further explore in Chapter 3, these interpersonal relationships make up a cultural system which invariably includes some form of leadership.

Theological Reflections on Culture, Contextualization and Syncretism

God's image being reflected in individuals who, in turn, gather together to create a cultural context, implies that the concept of culture carries theological ramifications. I agree with First Nations author Richard Twiss when he states that all cultures to some degree reflect "the attributes of our Creator Himself" (Twiss 2000, 78). If this is the case, then in some measure all cultural expressions are necessary for a full-orbed human response to the Creator God. Indeed, Scripture does not advocate one culture over another. Anthropologist Charles Kraft writes, "We see God working in terms of Jewish culture to reach Jews, yet, refusing to impose Jewish customs on Gentiles" (Kraft 1996, 78-79). This truth presented a difficult challenge as the Early Church attempted to resolve the differences between Jewish and Gentile culture. It required someone with the Apostle Peter's *gravitas* and leadership to begin to understand and truly present the Gospel as Good News for all people (Acts 10, 11, 15). Notwithstanding Peter's example, the

Apostle Paul encountered significant opposition as he sought to take the Gospel to the Gentiles.

However, if aspects of God's character and image are present in all cultures, it must be understood that culture also displays the depravity that resulted from the sin of Adam and Eve and affected the entire human race (Gen 3; Rom. 3:23). "God is at work in every culture, but Satan is too...The image of God can be found in every culture, but the effects of our depravity are also evident" (Plueddemann 2009, 64). Hayward notes that sin may be evident in any given culture in a variety of ways. The use and abuse of power and authority, the exploitation of certain members of society and the establishment of values and behaviors that violate God's ideals for holiness and His creation purposes are some examples (Hayward 2003, 40).

This reality presents a dilemma: What does biblical leadership look like in a particular culture, recognizing both the redemptive as well as the depraved aspects of that culture? And, more pointedly to the topic of this study, how should a leader's cultural identity be considered from a biblical perspective? To answer these questions, the response to cross-cultural differences will be examined, particularly in a Christian ministry setting. Jacobs, Twiss and LeBlanc outline four typical responses they have observed in the relationship between Anglo-European culture and that of Native North Americans (Jacobs, Twiss and LeBlanc 2003, 17-19). The first is rejection. That is, Anglo-European believers consider their culture to be THE biblical culture and therefore reject every aspect of Native culture. To follow God and live in a biblical manner automatically implies

adopting Western culture. A second response has been to absorb Native beliefs and rites. In this case, the unbiblical aspects of Native culture have been left unexamined or corrected. As long as the individual fulfills some Christian requirements, then other practices may be tolerated. A third possible response to questions of culture and faith has been syncretism, which means taking the non-Biblical Native beliefs and practices and making them compatible with Christianity (Jacobs, Twiss and LeBlanc 2003, 17-19). Hayward adds to that definition by stating that syncretism is “the unacceptable adaptation of the Gospel to cultural traditions” (Hayward 2003, 43). He further defines “unacceptable adaptation” to mean anything which changes the core of the Gospel message.

The fourth possible response regards sanctification as the only means to recognize both the godly attributes in a culture as well as the depraved. The term “sanctification” describes a process by which God’s Word and the direction of the Holy Spirit guide believers of various cultures in determining which aspects of a given culture should be rejected and those which can be redeemed or included as a culturally relevant expression of Christian faith (Jacobs, Twiss and LeBlanc 2003, 19). This multi-cultural process is not one-sided. Rather, it serves to enlighten the perspective of all who engage in the effort. Volf underscores the importance of cultural sanctification in his description of the evil in one’s own culture:

In order to keep our allegiance to Jesus Christ pure, we need to nurture commitment to the multicultural community of Christian churches. We need to see ourselves and our own understanding of God’s future with the eyes of Christians from other cultures...so as to make sure that the voice

of our culture has not drowned out the voice of Jesus Christ, “the one Word of God” (Volf 1996, 53-54).

It is the act of inter-cultural giving and receiving that not only serves as a balance to our own perspective, but also enhances our relationship with God.

Implications for Leadership Formation

A full discussion of contextualization, along with the application of cultural redemption to the wide variety of issues relating to Christian practice, goes well beyond the scope of this study. Yet, these concepts raise important questions that carry implications for cross-cultural leadership formation. First, God is supra-cultural. He does not favor, emphasize, or honor one culture above another. Human culture formed part of His creation (Hayward 2003, 38). Created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), men and women have been blessed with creativity and diversity, every aspect of life carrying with it the potential to provide a glimpse of God’s character. Similarly, depravity runs through the human race distorting the image of the Divine. Leadership, in the many forms described in Scripture, presents numerous examples of this paradox: people created in the image of God used leadership abilities to bless people, while at other times doing them much harm. Moses’ leadership manner and style varied greatly from that of Queen Esther, yet God used both these leaders in their culture and context to bring about the salvation of an entire people. Throughout Scripture, God interacts with men and women according to their cultural context.

Second, if all cultures carry elements of God's nature, should the leadership identity and principles embedded within any culture be ignored? Richard Twiss argues from 1 Corinthians 12 that all parts of the body of Christ are necessary; no part is more important or better than the other. Sadly, he goes on to state, "It may be difficult to hear or to accept, but I believe that because of clashing cultural worldviews, the Anglo expression of Christ and His kingdom has said to the Native expression of Christ and His kingdom, 'I have no need of you. I don't need your customs, your arts, your society, your language, concepts or perspectives'" (Twiss 2000, 57). Rather than ignoring or rejecting appropriate leadership models, I will frame this issue from a positive perspective: What leadership models and/or practices does Native culture contribute to the discussion of church leadership? How would North American Natives firmly rooted in their identity in Christ and their cultural identity exercise the gift of leadership? Randy Woodley's contrast between the group leadership of ceremonies such as the Pow Wow and Talking Circle compared with the compartmentalized leadership of most Euro-American churches illustrates the importance of this question (Woodley 2003, 70). The difference in leadership style is not a matter of right or wrong, but rather of cultural perspective.

Third, how can biblical discernment be practiced in the matter of determining culturally appropriate Christian leadership? Much discussion has taken place surrounding various Native expressions of worship such as the drum and dance and other church practices. However, in the case of biblical leadership principles, it is perhaps more helpful to start with basic guidelines before moving

to specific application. In his exploration of multi-cultural leadership, James Plueddemann offers a trans-cultural model that includes eight biblical principles to guide the discussion in this matter:

1. Leadership is a gift of the Spirit. (Rom. 12:8)
2. Leaders bring glory to God. (1 Cor. 10:31)
3. The leader takes initiative. (Acts 6:1-4)
4. Leaders harmonize the gifts of others. (1 Cor. 12:12-31)
5. Leaders enhance the gifts of others. (2 Tim. 1:6)
6. Leaders focus the gifts of others. (Titus 1:5)
7. Leaders help people grow into their full God-given potential. (Col. 1:28-29)
8. Leaders help the body of Christ to become more mature. (Eph. 4:11-13)
(Plueddemann 2009, 173-179)

How these concepts are applied will take on a cultural perspective. The practice of leadership may vary according to the context while the principles remain grounded in Scripture.

The path toward a theologically sound, contextualized integration of faith and practice as they pertain to leadership is not clearly defined nor universally accepted. Even with help from a model such as Plueddemann's the application of these principles will vary according to the context. I agree with First Nations author Terry LeBlanc when he states that an over-arching, universal Christian culture does not exist (LeBlanc 2003, 166). In light of this, it is helpful to glean further guidance from biblical examples of those who exercised leadership in a multi-cultural environment.

Biblical Leadership in a Cross-Cultural Context: The Apostle Paul

The Apostle Paul provides us with arguably the clearest biblical example of life and ministry in a cross-cultural context. As noted earlier, although it was Peter that God used to introduce Gentile converts into the Church (Acts 10), Paul was given the specific mission of taking God's message to the Gentile world (Acts 9:15). This by no means could be construed as an easy task. Among other things, the Apostle faced the challenges of a foreign audience, at times hostile to his message, along with the extremely apprehensive Jewish culture from which he had been sent. The hesitancy and struggle to take the message of Christ across cultural lines must not be viewed merely as a desire to maintain control. Biblical scholar and commentator F.F. Bruce states, "There was an important question of principle at stake, as they [the Jewish believers] saw it: with such an increase in the number of Gentile Christians, to a point where they must soon outnumber Jewish Christians...how were the church's ethical standards to be safeguarded?" (Bruce 1977, 173) This question cuts to the heart of the dilemma which Paul and others faced: Can Christian practice vary between cultures without compromising biblical truth?

Paul's letter to the Galatians clearly confronts this issue in at least three distinct ways. First, Paul writes to the Galatians in order to remind them of the true Gospel message (Gal. 1:9). His purpose in writing is "to remedy a desperate situation, to call early Christians back from the Mosaic Law to grace, from legalism to faith" (Campbell 1983, 588). It was as if Jewish believers wanted to keep the Gospel in the orbit of their tradition and laws, even while Paul

proclaimed a message that transcends culture. Bruce cites Galatians 2:21 and then explains, "...if the law were still in force, as the way of justification, then the age of the Messiah had not yet dawned, and so Jesus could not be the Messiah...Such a message was no gospel, whatever it might be called; it was a travesty of the true gospel" (Bruce 1977, 181). Paul clearly understood and retained his Jewish identity and cultural roots (cf. Phil. 3:1-6). Yet, he maintained that justification through faith is an act of God's grace (Gal. 2:16, 3:24).

Second, Paul provides an example of one who resisted pressure to conform to cultural religious standards. In Galatians 2:11-14, the Apostle describes an incident where Peter and even his own close ministry partner Barnabas were swayed by peer pressure to create cultural division among the believers. Paul felt compelled to oppose Peter "to his face" for his hypocritical actions (Gal. 2:11-13). Peter, one who God had used to first bring the gospel message to the Gentiles (Acts 10), and who had been instrumental in settling the issue of cultural identity and the gospel (Acts 15), now had seemingly reverted to attaching Jewish customs and practices to Christian conduct. In contrast, salvation by grace provides the freedom for believers to meet in equal fellowship. "Anything less would make of Christians party groups, not the one body of Christ" (Mikolaski 1987, 1095). Paul proclaimed there was neither Jew nor Greek for all are one in Christ (Gal. 3:28). "The middle wall of partition between them had been demolished by the work of Christ; Paul would not stand idly by and see it rebuilt, whether as a religious or as a social barrier" (Bruce 1977, 178). For Paul, devotion to Christ did not come at the expense of cultural identity.

Finally, in Galatians 3-4, Paul provides a view of a missional God at work to redeem his creation long before the implementation of the Mosaic Law. “Striking a tremendous blow at the Judaizers, Paul linked the past with the present and declared that just as Abraham was saved by faith so were those who now claimed to be his children...both Jews and Gentiles have been declared righteous by faith” (Campbell 1983, 597). It is not that Paul disregarded his own cultural heritage or Roman citizenship in favor of another (cf. Rom. 9-11; Phil. 3:4-6; Acts 22:25); rather, he understood and preached the principle of spiritual identity of Christ living in every believer (Gal. 2:20). As a result, the Galatian believers, along with the wide variety of other Christ followers under Paul’s influence and leadership, were encouraged to live out that divine identity within their own cultural context.

In summary, I offer the following observations regarding spiritual and cultural identity and leadership. First, people are created for relationship with their Creator—to be connected to the Vine. If allowed to recognize and live within this identity, people will be fruitful in the work that God has prepared for them. Similarly, a Christian leader’s effectiveness comes from a life rooted in relationship to God. Talents, gifts, and life experience play a role in a person’s life, but they all find their full realization when built upon a Christ-centered spiritual identity. Third, cultural context should not be ignored. The presence of the image of God within individuals and thus its presence in some measure in all cultures implies that cultural expression forms the foundation of a person or group’s response to the Creator. Biblical teaching and Holy Spirit-guided

discernment are needed within a particular setting to find the balance of practices that must be rejected and those that may be sanctified or accepted. Just as Paul urged the Galatians to resist the pull of Jewish tradition while remaining true to the core Gospel message, so today all believers are free to express their identity and faith in a culturally appropriate manner.

In addition to a theological perspective of identity, culture and leadership, I will now explore these themes from the vantage point of System Theory.

CHAPTER 3

PRECEDENT SOCIAL SCIENCE AND A HISTORICAL CASE

As discussed in Chapter 2, human existence involves relationship with God the Creator and with other people through a cultural context. System Theory offers helpful tools for understanding relationships. It illuminates the factors that strengthen a given relational system and also calls attention to the anxiety that undermines it. The concept of self-differentiation, one aspect of System Theory, provides further insight into the matter of leadership development. Exploring concepts developed in the work of Edwin H. Friedman and others, this chapter will consider the argument that effective leaders are those emotionally developed individuals who are making progress toward self-differentiation. Furthermore, an integral part of this journey is living within one's cultural identity. Drawing on theoretical and historical examples, this chapter will demonstrate that effective education and leadership formation must be responsive to the surrounding cultural context. For the purposes of this project, context includes the history and culture of the Ahtna people.

A Brief Description of Ahtna History and Culture

The Ahtna form part of the Athabaskan peoples spread across northwestern North America. Their historical home has been the Copper River

valley in south central Alaska, although it also extended northwest nearly to present Denali National Park (De Laguna and McClellan 1981, 641). Their name comes from the indigenous word for the Copper River, a central feature of their historical territory. Cultural anthropologist Richard Nelson notes that the northern Athabaskan peoples are some of the least known contemporary native groups, in part because little has been discovered of their history prior to contact with European settlers (Nelson 1983, 2).

For the Ahtna people, that contact came in the form of Russian explorers in the late eighteenth century. The modern portion of their history may be divided into five periods: early Russian, 1783-1806; late Russian, 1807-1867; early American, 1876-1900; 20th century to World War II, 1900-1941; and recent, 1941 to present (De Laguna and McClellan 1981, 643). The picture of Ahtna culture before the 19th century is somewhat unclear. “Historically, the Ahtna people were semi-nomadic and extensive travelers, continually following their food source and moving from place to place according to the seasons” (Ahtna Inc 2014). Salmon, moose, and caribou formed some of the primary elements of their subsistence lifestyle. This lifestyle continued well into the 20th century and is vividly recalled by Ahtna member Fred John, Jr.:

My parents, and other parents in surrounding villages lived off the land. As a child growing up in the remote village of Mentasta, the land was good to us, the sky was good to us as were the creeks, lakes and rivers. They supplied us with all our needs. We respected the land and because of that the land gave back...we knew when to hunt and when to fish...we lived in our land and we shared it with each other. (John 2013)

Ahtna identity, connected to their lifestyle, land, and language came under pressure to change as white exploration and development continued. “The ax, repeating rifle, fish wheel, tent, and stove eliminated the caribou fence, dipping platform, and large native house, and with them the native chiefs” (De Laguna and McClellan 1981, 643). Fred John, Jr. provides another glimpse of this transition from an Ahtna perspective: “We were not ignorant people who needed to be told how to manage our fish and wildlife. We lived with the land...and knew the law. Our law. No one ever asked us about Indian Law. Or how we do things. They started bossing us around in our own place” (John 2013). The introduction of the school system in the 1940’s furthered the impact upon Ahtna culture and especially the language. “...[T]hey fear the loss of their separate identity. ‘We lost the track—like we go out with snowshoes, and the wind blows the tracks away...that’s the way it’s going to be’” (De Laguna and McClellan 1981, 644). Current efforts by the Ahtna Heritage Foundation and the Copper River Native Association are underway to revive the Ahtna language among the 1700 tribal members.

Leadership among the Ahtna has often exhibited a blend of economics, politics, and religion. Politically, the Ahtna never organized under one chief, but rather functioned with local autonomous groups. “Every major settlement had a ‘chief’ or ‘rich man’...although he was often a shaman...his power was primarily economic” (De Laguna and McClellan 1981, 656). Today, Ahtna, Inc., an Alaskan Native Corporation, and the Copper River Native Association provide economic resources as well as health and human services to tribal members.

Furthermore, the Ahtna recognize a traditional First Chief and Second Chief. Historically, religious guidance and leadership of the Ahtna people belonged in the hands of the “dream doctor” or shaman. According to Nelson, the shamans “did not have power themselves, but they knew how to use the spirit forces that surrounded them in nature” (Nelson 1983, 29). This force or power was often directed toward curing—or causing—illnesses, healing wounds, or in some way influencing the environment in their favor. However, with the coming of Russian explorers, the Russian Orthodox Church began to shape Ahtna culture. Although Russian traders were violently expelled from the region in 1848, by the 1930’s all Ahtnas had been baptized in the Russian Orthodox faith (De Laguna and McClellan 1983, 643). Yet there is little evidence of Orthodox practice among the Ahtna people today other than traditional Orthodox gravesites marked by a cross and surrounded by a fence. Largely due to 20th century missionary efforts, a variety of local churches, including two established through the ministry of SEND North, may be found in Ahtna communities.

System Theory sheds further light into the matter of leadership development within the Ahtna context.

System Theory, Differentiation, and Leadership

Drawing from the research of Dr. Murray Bowen and others, System Theory (also known as Bowen Theory or Family Systems Theory) provides insight into any relational system. “System Theory is a way of conceptualizing reality. It organizes our thinking from a specific vantage point. System thinking

considers the interrelatedness of the parts” (Steinke 2006, 3). This perspective differs from simple cause and effect thinking, common in the physical world, which can result in inadequate, simplistic solutions. For instance it could lead to considering that a particular relational issue or situation within a family or group has been caused by Person A. Cause and effect thinking would conclude that simply taking care of, or removing Person A, would solve the matter. Instead of considering events, actions, and circumstances in such a linear fashion, System Theory seeks to understand how all the parts in a given context influence each other. “In the systems model, there is recognition of the connections between people. It says that people can only be understood fully within the context of their relationships. No one lives or acts in isolation, and we are all affected by each other’s behavior” (Richardson 1996, 25). For Dr. Bowen, the nuclear family represented the most basic emotional unit. This unit affects all the members within it. It causes us to be “aware of being a small part of something larger than self—one’s family in all of its generations” (Gilbert 2006b, 2).

Given that System Theory originated in the study of the family unit, the question may arise as to the usefulness and application of this perspective in the context of a larger group such as an organization, congregation, or even an entire society or culture. Gilbert argues for a broad application of systems thinking by stating, “...much of the behavior people exhibit in organizations is patterned in that original group, one’s own family, so there is no way we can understand group behavior without understanding the family first” (Gilbert 2006a, 6). Family System Thinking has been applied to any group of people, great or small, who are

relationally connected. “System Thinking looks for circles of influence” (Steinke 2006, 5). Wide ranging adaptability to the variety of human experience enhances the usefulness of System Theory.

The Problem of Anxiety

System Theory study of the family unit has led observers to conclude that various forms of anxiety run as a common thread throughout all relationships. “All relationship systems become anxious. Put people together and inevitably anxiety will rise” (Steinke 2006, 15). However, not all anxiety should be viewed as a negative emotion. It may cause someone to sound the alarm—literally or figuratively—when needed in a dangerous or harmful situation. In a variety of ways, anxiety can provoke change. “If, however it reaches a certain intensity, it prevents the very change it provokes...we are too reactive to be responsive” (Steinke 2006, 16). Friedman further explains the type of negative anxiety that relationship systems experience: “Chronic anxiety might be compared to the volatile atmosphere of a room filled with gas fumes, where any sparking incident could set off a conflagration, and where people would then blame the person who struck the match rather than trying to disperse the fumes” (Friedman 2007, 58). Reflecting on Friedman’s work, Christian commentator Alastair Roberts adds, “This chronic anxiety is self-reinforcing: the greater the chronic anxiety in any community, the more oriented it will become to its symptoms, and the more likely it is to export its troubles into the wider society through violence, litigiousness, or

other means” (Roberts 2013a). Clearly, according to System Theory, anxiety is one of the primary factors working against healthy relationships.

How does chronic anxiety manifest itself in a relational system? Friedman has observed at least five characteristics of a chronically anxious family, group, or society: The first is reactivity. Members of the group are highly reactive to events and to each other. “Highly reactive families are panic in search of a trigger” (Friedman 2007, 63). Second is the herd instinct. This behavior is demonstrated by excessive togetherness at the expense of healthy self-differentiation. Rather than focusing on a given strength, this characteristic leads to a focus on the least mature, most dependent, or the most dysfunctional member of the group. “The major effect...on leadership is that it hinders, if not cripples, the capacity to be decisive” (Friedman 2007, 69). Another characteristic of the chronically anxious group is blame displacement. By blaming outside people or events, individuals fail to own a particular problem. Group members are distracted from painful matters, the resolution of which would bring healing and growth, while focusing the blame elsewhere. Further, chronic anxiety leads to a quick-fix mentality.

The same escapist thinking that leads to the displacement of blame also leads to the assumption that problems can be fixed in a linear way. The quick-fix mentality is the other side of the coin of displacement. Both are a flight from challenge, simplistic in their conception of life, and outwardly focused. (Friedman 2007, 84)

These four characteristics of the chronically anxious combine to create poorly defined leadership. “The poorly defined leader is led around by crisis, lacks the

distance to gain clear vision, and is reluctant to take a clear stand” (Roberts 2013a). In fact, in situations where some form of leadership selection takes place, the chronically anxious group will invariably select a leader who fits this description. “This effect is uniform across the board for all ‘parents and presidents’ irrespective of their personality profile, their cultural background, or their place in society (Friedman 2007, 62-89). Friedman’s summary thoughts on poorly defined leadership point to the need for a solution: a positive manner for resolving the issue of ever-present anxiety. Although System Theory may give part of the needed answer, the connection to biblical principles will also be explored in order to provide a theological perspective.

A Biblical Perspective on System Theory

How can System Theory be applied according to biblical truth? There are at least three significant areas of connection and application. The first and perhaps most obvious is the comparison between the Pauline concept of the Body of Christ and system thinking. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul gives his most complete description of the Church as the Body of Christ. Just as the human body is made up of many parts, so too, the Body of Christ contains a wide variety of parts. “Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free” (1 Cor. 12:13 NLT). Not only are there many parts, but all parts have importance and function; no part or member of the Body may be discarded or considered unneeded (1 Cor. 12:14-22). Furthermore, and perhaps most directly related to systems thinking, every part of the human body as well as the Body of Christ is

impacted by what happens to any individual part, whether for good or bad (1 Cor. 12:26). In this light, Paul's teaching parallels the thinking of Bowen, Friedman and others. The local church, as an expression of the Body of Christ, functions as a relational system rather than a series of simple cause and effect reactions.

"People in the church, as in any group, are intricately interconnected. They exist in a system that is much bigger and more powerful than the individual members. Each person both influences and is influenced by everyone else" (Richardson 1996, 26).

This leads to a second link between system thinking and biblical truth: the widespread effect of sin. Paul declares in Romans 5 that through one man (Adam), sin and death entered the human race. All creation suffers the devastating effects of sin (Rom. 3:23, 8:22-23). Not only is the impact of sin seen in general, but biblical examples abound showing the result of an individual's sin within a larger system (Josh. 7; Acts 5). A modern example would be how the moral failure of a family member, a church congregant or an employee of a Christian organization demonstrates the impact of sin on that entire system. Although not a one-to-one match with Friedman's previously described idea of chronic anxiety, sin and its subsequent effects lend credence to the principles of System Theory.

There is, however, a third and more positive connection between System Theory and biblical truth, one that highlights the importance of Christian leadership development. If the concept of chronic anxiety and the effects of sin strike a negative chord, the movement of the Holy Spirit or revival lends positive support to the ideas surrounding systems thinking. Consider, for example, the

change that came upon an entire Samaritan village when a woman declared, “Come and meet a man who told me everything I ever did! Can this be the Messiah?” (John 4:29 NLT). Paul’s message and ministry caused similar impact in the city of Ephesus (Acts 19:8-41). This positive possibility within a relational system stands in contrast to what may be viewed as a negative, anxiety-focused starting point in System Theory literature. It also points to the power of a transformed life, one that is truly able to separate itself from the surrounding anxiety, or in System Theory terms, self-differentiate.

Self-Differentiation—An Explanation

In the face of chronic anxiety and its ongoing impact upon relationships, one primary response from System Theory is the concept of “differentiation,” which stands as a counterpoint to “fusion.” “Fusion and differentiation are not the same as togetherness and individuality, nor are they the same as emotional closeness and distance. Fusion and differentiation are about emotional processes in relationships” (Richardson 1996, 81). The more one is fused into relationships with others—that is, unable to separate individuality from the relational system—the more of oneself is either given up or gained through that relationship, something that actually leads to further anxiety. Relational fusion may seem to fulfill the need for togetherness, but it ultimately leads to more life problems, poorer decisions, concern about others’ opinions, and relationship trouble (Gilbert 2006b, 31).

Within System Theory, the contrast to fusion is differentiation. Steinke provides a good description of what he terms as “being separate together” or self-differentiation:

1. Defining yourself and staying in touch with others.
 2. Being responsible for yourself and responsive to others.
 3. Maintaining your integrity and well-being without intruding on that of others.
 4. Allowing the enhancement of the other’s integrity and well-being without feeling abandoned, inferior, or less of a self.
 5. Having an “I” and entering a relationship with another “I” without losing your self or diminishing the self of the other.
- (Steinke 2006, 12)

As an affirmation of these descriptors, Gilbert somewhat paradoxically declares that, “the more separate the selves...the better the relationships operate, and the better people feel more of the time” (Gilbert 2006b, 33). Self-differentiation does not lead to aloofness or isolation. Rather, it allows an individual to function in an inter-connected way within the relational system, be it family, community, or church.

There are parallels to the concepts of differentiation and a healthy pursuit of self in other literature. For example, in *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer first describes a life that is not true to itself as being “divided” and lacking integrity. From his perspective, a person comes into the world as an integral being. In time, however, they begin to live a divided or false life to the measure that they seek to conform to the world (system) around them. “As we become more obsessed with succeeding, or at least surviving, in that world, we lose touch with our souls and disappear into our roles” (Palmer 2008, 15). For Palmer, the path to wholeness of self lies in a journey that combines the seeming paradox of

inner solitude with the company of a caring community. Echoing Friedman's call for differentiated connectedness, Palmer explains, "*Solitude* does not necessarily mean living apart from others; rather, it means never living apart from one's self...*Community* does not necessarily mean living face-to-face with others; rather, it means never losing the awareness that we are connected to each other" (Palmer 2008, 55).

Another parallel to the process of differentiation is the concept of Emotional Intelligence as developed by psychologists Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves.

Emotional intelligence is your ability to recognize and understand emotions in yourself and others, and your ability to use this awareness to manage your behavior and relationships...It affects how we manage behavior, navigate social complexities, and make personal decisions that achieve positive results. (Bradberry and Greaves 2009, 17)

This description is not unlike a systems thinking goal of high level functioning, which comes as an individual grows along the spectrum toward differentiation of self (Gilbert 2006b, 33). Improving one's emotional intelligence (EQ) involves growth in four critical areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management (Bradberry and Greaves 2009, 24). There also exists a strong correlation between EQ and leadership function. Research has shown that EQ skills are more important to job performance than any other leadership skill (Bradberry and Greaves 2009, 236). Parker's concept of the "whole self" as well as EQ principles provide ample support to the System Theory perspective on leadership.

The Need for Well-Differentiated Leadership

In the face of the chronic anxiety present in our world, how does leadership bring about positive change? Friedman is adamant in his belief that any relational system will only function well to the degree that its leadership is well-differentiated. Friedman likens the self-differentiated leader to the immune system whose major purpose is to preserve the integrity of the organism; the leader must be able to distinguish self from non-self (Friedman 2007, 182). He further states:

[A well-differentiated leader] is someone who has clarity about his or her own life goals, and, therefore, someone who is less likely to become lost in the anxious, emotional processes swirling about. I mean someone who can be separate while still remaining connected, and therefore can maintain a modifying, non-anxious, and sometimes challenging presence. I mean someone who can manage his or her own reactivity to the automatic reactivity of others, and therefore be able to take stands at the risk of displeasing...No one does this easily, and most leaders, I have learned, can improve their capacity. (Friedman 2007, 14)

Friedman's description of the well-differentiated leader presents a daunting challenge to those seeking to facilitate the formation of such individuals.

Furthermore, this research project uncovered signs of self-differentiation in stories of past Ahtna leaders as well as pointing to pathways toward the formation of such leaders.

System Theory and Culture

It has been shown that System Theory provides tools for navigating the world of relationships, a world that includes the negative effects of anxiety as well as the possibility of transformative self-differentiated leadership. Nevertheless, given the context of this research project, are the leadership principles of System

Theory described here applicable across cultures? Friedman’s research addresses this issue. His experience brought him into contact with families and groups from across the globe. Initially, he followed traditional social science in an effort to discover how groups from various cultures differed from one another. Further experience, however, caused his thinking to change in a fundamental way. “Rather than assuming that a family’s cultural background determined its emotional processes, I found it far more useful to see culture as a medium through which a family’s own unique multi-generational emotional process worked its art” (Friedman 2007, 7). He goes on, “Soon I began to realize that cultural camouflage also obscured the universality of emotional process in institutions” (Friedman 2007, 8). Human relationships and emotions, regardless of the culture, are continually marked by balance and imbalance. Any group of people, big or small, is a living system where leaders and followers are intimately connected through an emotional field they have created—with positive or negative effects on the health of the entire organization (Cox 2006, 3). Friedman concludes that all human systems require leadership, and well-differentiated leadership or its absence has the same effect on any relationship system made of people, irrespective of their culture (Friedman 2007, 224). The characteristics and description of differentiated leadership, however, may vary widely depending on the cultural context.

Within the ministry context of this project, this conclusion calls for an understanding of the characteristics of a well-differentiated Ahtna Christian leader. Further, if such leadership is the desired goal, what would be the steps or

fundamentals of the formation process? It does little good, and in fact may be counter-productive, to attempt to develop leaders using methods or a program designed with a culturally different audience in mind (Steffen 1997, 201). Not only does that individual struggle with the formation process itself, but they will have great difficulty in exercising appropriate leadership upon returning to the home system. It has already been demonstrated through Friedman, Steinke, and others that the well-differentiated leader remains connected to their community. Thus, the matter of cultural identity must also occupy a prominent place in a discussion of leadership formation.

Cultural Identity and Education

The previous discussion of System Theory has shown that people live and function within multiple systems, one of the most comprehensive of which includes one's cultural identity. Individuals bring to those systems their own identity made up of a complex blend of "personality, life experiences, cognitive and other skills, and emotional makeup" (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky 2009, 181). A powerful force shaping this identity is the educational experience. All cultures have a system of education (Church 2005, 82). The experience within this system, if congruent with an individual's cultural values, may seem to occur almost naturally as part of the backdrop of life. However, First Nations author and educator Anita Keith describes the impact when cultural values collide in the arena of education:

We need to understand that worldviews are generally neutral; neither good nor bad. But they can become problematic when they are expressed in an ethnocentric fashion. And since the 'White race' has been viewed as superior and 'White culture' as normative, this has created the environment wherein ethnocentric educational issues have evolved. Remodeling is needed. A positive building block in the process of remodeling is to grasp conclusively the truth that Native peoples have different worldviews and different values than White people... (Keith 2005, 45)

Keith raises an issue which has implications for leadership development.

"Education is a values-laden activity" (Ferris 1995, 15). Early missionaries arrived in North America and, seeing no physical schools, concluded that education did not exist. They failed to understand that in Aboriginal culture the primary means of education were "story-telling, mentoring and active participation" (Church 2005, 82). Failure to recognize the importance of cultural values and identity has had ongoing negative impact on the education process in general as well as on formal leadership development programs. Charles Kraft writes, "We have transplanted such institutions [churches, schools] with all good intentions on the assumption they are working well at home and that, therefore they will work well here...Indeed, they prove disruptive to indigenous values and cultural traits that we would otherwise wish to maintain" (Kraft 1996, 287). The pursuit of culturally relevant leadership development points to the need for a more culturally responsive process, one that can adapt to the surrounding context.

Culturally Appropriate Educational Standards

Calling attention to the critical role of cultural identity as part of the formation process, the Assembly of Alaska Native Educators has adopted

culturally appropriate educational standards for primary and secondary schools. These standards bring into focus four primary aspects of the formal education process: (1) students, (2) educators, (3) curriculum, and (4) the school facility itself (table 1). In each of these categories the goal is to be responsive to the surrounding context, learning and growing with global awareness while being rooted in a strong cultural identity. The Assembly's standards reflect System Thinking by recognizing that students and educators form part of a greater cultural system in which each part affects and is affected by the others. One example of such thinking is found in section 3: A culturally responsive curriculum recognizes cultural knowledge as part of a living and constantly adapting system that is grounded in the past, but continues to grow through the present and into the future. Furthermore, the Assembly's work highlights the link between cultural identity and the successful development of students.

Those seeking the emergence and growth of Christian leaders should not aspire to anything less in terms of culturally responsive leadership development. This perspective offered by Native educators echoes Ferris' previous statement on education as a values-laden activity (Ferris 1995, 15) and raises the standard for ministry leadership formation efforts.

Table 1. Culturally Appropriate Educational Standards. Adapted from the Assembly of Alaska Native Educators 1998, 7-19.

<p>1. Culturally knowledgeable students are...</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well-grounded in the cultural heritage and traditions of their community. • Able to build on the knowledge and skills of the local cultural community from which to achieve personal and academic success. • Able to actively participate in various cultural environments. • Able to engage effectively in learning activities that are based on traditional ways of knowing and learning. • Demonstrate an awareness and appreciation of the relationships and processes of interaction of all elements in the world around them.
<p>2. Culturally responsive educators...</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate local ways of knowing and teaching in their work. • Use the local environment and community resources on a regular basis to link what they are teaching to the everyday lives of the students. • Participate in community events and activities. • Work closely with parents to achieve a high level of complementary educational expectations between home and school. • Recognize the full educational potential of each student and provide the challenges necessary for them to achieve that potential.
<p>3. A culturally responsive curriculum...</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforces the integrity of the cultural knowledge that students bring with them. • Recognizes cultural knowledge as part of a living and constantly adapting system that is grounded in the past, but continues to grow through the present and into the future. • Uses the local language and cultural knowledge as a foundation for the rest of the curriculum. • Fosters a complementary relationship across knowledge derived from diverse systems. • Situates local knowledge and actions in a global context.
<p>4. A culturally responsive school...</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fosters the ongoing participation of Elders in all aspects of the schooling process. • Provides multiple avenues for students to access the learning that is offered, as well as multiple forms of assessment for students to demonstrate what they have learned. • Provides opportunities for students to learn in and/or about their heritage language. • Has a high level of involvement of professional staff who are of the same cultural background as the students with whom they are working. • Consists of facilities that are compatible with the community environment.

Implications for Christian Leadership Development

In some form, education will be a significant part of the Christian ministry leadership formation process. Long time Alaskan church leader Rev. Dr. Michael Oleksa states, “Native Alaskans need to be trained, as the Aleuts a century ago were, to assume leadership roles in their communities and institutions, and especially in the Church. This means education” (Oleksa 1992, 214). He further echoes the concerns highlighted earlier by Keith, while recognizing that schools and Christian missions bear much responsibility for the current situation. “The entire vision and philosophy of education must consequently be quite different. The goal must not be to ‘re-make’ the Native Alaskan in the image of someone else” (Oleksa 1992, 214). Speaking from a global perspective missiologist Tom Steffen concurs “Cognitive learning styles differ, to say nothing of the different political and religious backgrounds, felt needs, and even successive generations with a people group” (Steffen 1997, 200-201). Simply providing a leadership curriculum with its unexamined accompanying cultural values ignores both the challenge and opportunity in cross-cultural leadership formation.

In light of this call for culturally responsive training, a model of church leadership development that attempts to bridge cultural gap differences will be explored.

Cross-Cultural Leadership Development

Ministry leaders and organizations around the globe have wrestled with the challenge of creating an effective leadership formation process in a given local

context. This challenge will be considered from the perspective of a theoretical model along with an historical example.

A Global Ministry Training Model

This ministry formation model, presented in the work edited by Robert Ferris, *Establishing Ministry Training: A Manual for Programme Developers*, comes out of the global outreach of the World Evangelical Fellowship. Recognizing the need for a model that may be carried across cultural boundaries, Ferris and his team were commissioned by the WEF to create a process that could guide those seeking to develop Christian ministry leaders.

According to Ferris, in seeking to develop ministry leadership in a cross-cultural context, care must be taken at the outset to avoid the trap of simply replicating what has been done in one's own culture (Ferris 1995, 2). Others echo Ferris' concern. In his forward to A. H. Mathias Zahniser's work, *Symbol and Ceremony: Making Disciples Across Cultures*, Darrell L. Whiteman writes:

Unfortunately, most of these [discipleship programs] are culture-bound, designed for white Anglo-Saxon middle-class Americans, with a heavy emphasis on the cognitive and cerebral patterns of discipleship. Discipleship in this mode frequently means amassing mountains of information. This kind of "left-brain" discipleship misses the opportunity to use more multi-sensory approaches—employing a wider range of our emotions, imagination, creativity, and the right side of our brain, which engage sights, sounds, and smells. And of course, discipleship that focuses on the headiness of cognitive information often misses the power of symbols and ceremonies, and seldom transfers well from one cultural context to another. (Whiteman 1997, ix)

Thus, continues Ferris, the first step in successful program development must include the examination of cultural assumptions and the building of consensus in

six areas: (1) the specific goals of the training, (2) the context of the training, (3) the training structure, (4) the “who” of training, (5) the “what” of training, and (6) how to achieve ongoing growth in terms of Christ-likeness and ministry effectiveness (Ferris 1995, 6-13). What may seem to be a time-consuming, dialogue-intensive process in the early stages of development actually enhances the effectiveness of the program while avoiding a future clash of cultural values.

The remaining steps in the model created by Ferris and his team build on this foundation and move the leadership formation process from the development of an outcomes profile to the creation of training goals, objectives, and the actual learning experiences. Without negating the importance of the entire process, the strength of this program model lies in its foundation: learning must be a participative process (Ferris 1995, 15). Further, the conception and design of the training is itself a collaborative learning endeavor. Ignoring this truth could cause a cross-cultural leadership formation effort to stumble out of the starting gate by not giving sufficient time and attention to building a truly collaborative consensus from within the cultural context.

An Historical Example of Leadership Development

Several aspects of the Ferris model are illustrated both positively and negatively by examples from SEND ministry history in the Copper Valley. Vince and Becky Joy traveled from New Jersey to Alaska in the spring of 1937 with the goal of launching the ministry of the newly incorporated Central Alaskan Missions (CAM—now known as SEND North). Following what they considered

the call of God, the family settled in the village of Copper Center. That first winter could be described as “one adjustment after another: oil lamps, gasoline lanterns, flat irons, scrub boards, a hand wringer, outhouses, hauling water, and adapting to sub-zero temperatures” (Joy 1983, 41). These humble beginnings proved to be the first steps in what would later become a multi-faceted Christian organization that included a radio station, hospital, Bible college, and numerous church ministries scattered throughout central Alaska and Northern Canada.

From the beginning, Joy understood that indigenous church leadership played an essential role in the growth of the local church. Describing the early days of CAM’s leadership formation efforts in the 1950’s, missionary author Faye Crandall writes:

Concerned that native Christian leadership was essential to the future indigenous principle for the churches, and aware of the limited education of the people, the beginnings of a Bible school were formulated. Directed primarily toward those who, as children, had moved to the hunting area, to the trap lines, to the fish camps with their families catching a few months of schooling here and there, the Native Bible School became the study core for the next twenty years. Opening enrollment was six. (Joy 1983, 115)

This Native Bible School was linked to an annual event known as Native Bible Conference (now called the Wrangell Mountain Bible Conference). The Conference developed as a weeklong gathering in July filled with preaching, music, children/youth ministry, and shared meals. During the prior winter months, residents of the villages of Gulkana and Copper Center would prepare to participate in the leadership and ministry of this conference. Some would develop sermons, others practiced music, while yet another group prepared for the

outreach to children. This preparation and accompanying activities served to form a critical link in the development of local leadership (Robert Lee, August 26, 2013, conversation with author).

The highly participatory nature of the ministry and culturally responsive format of Native Bible School and the Bible Conference illustrate the strength of the Ferris collaborative development model. As a result of the various ministries of CAM, including Native Bible School and Native Bible Conference, four key Ahtna leaders emerged in the communities of Gulkana and Copper Center: Jim Mckinley, Harry Johns, Ben Neeley, and Fred Ewan. Each of these men battled with alcohol addiction before seeing their life transformed by the power of Christ. (See Appendix B for Ben Neeley's Christian testimony.) These four grew into leadership roles in the local church, the community, and eventually, they came to fill the role of Traditional Chief. All but Fred Ewan have passed on into the Lord's presence, but their legacy of leadership continues today.

As the CAM ministry continued to mature, Joy felt it necessary to lay the foundation for further leadership development opportunities. He began to make plans for what would become Alaska Bible College (ABC), which opened its doors in the fall of 1966. One key aspect of realizing the vision of offering Bible college training in Alaska fell into place when Dr. Robert Lee agreed to join CAM and assume the role of president of the newly founded college. Lee arrived in Alaska in 1966 to engage in what would become the most formal, structured leadership development ministry of CAM. Reflecting back on those early years of Bible college ministry, Lee noted that for reasons unknown to him, CAM

leadership decided to phase out the more grassroots ministry of Native Bible School in 1969 (Robert Lee, August 26, 2013, conversation with author).

Furthermore, as the college pursued formal accreditation, participation on the part of local Ahtna residents waned. As a result, the first ever ABC graduate, Rose Charley, an Ahtna resident of the Copper Valley, was the only Ahtna graduate from ABC for more than a decade. She is one of only two Ahtna who have completed a degree.

The college continued to expand in size and scope of program offerings. Conversely, further leadership development among the Ahtna largely came to a standstill. Looking back, no Ahtna member has filled the role of pastor in a local church since the time of the four men mentioned above. Rose Charley's reflection on her life sheds further light on the matter of indigenous leadership formation. She shared that her path of development—Bible college and seminary—was largely encouraged by school teachers and mentors, but not common among her peers. In fact, she felt that in many ways the community largely ignored her education (Rose Charley Tyone, August 31, 2013, conversation with author). In 2013, with few students from the local area, Alaska Bible College closed the campus in the Copper Valley and moved its operations to Palmer, Alaska.

In summary, the difference in results between the highly participatory Native Bible School and the subsequent more formal model of education offered by ABC would seem to lend credence to the culturally responsive principles proposed by Ferris and others. However, it must also be understood in light of the previous discussion of System Theory that other factors, positive and negative

have affected the development of Ahtna Christian leaders. Furthermore, the need for well-differentiated leadership calls for further exploration into what such a leader would look like among the Ahtna people. Far from pointing an incriminating finger at past efforts, this project instead focused on discovering fundamentals which can serve as guideposts in facilitating the emergence of Christian leadership. In the following chapter I will describe the Action Research process that guided this exploration and discovery.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY AND PROJECT DESCRIPTION

One discovery in this project was the power and potential benefits (described in Chapter 6) of the Action Research model itself. Given this significance, this chapter will first highlight the fundamentals of Action Research with a specific focus on author and practitioner Ernest Stringer's model (Stringer 2007, 9). I will also briefly explain the various methods used in the project: Interview, Appreciative Inquiry, Force Field Analysis, and Cooperative Inquiry. With this foundation in place, the second major section of the chapter will be an overview of the entire project followed by a full description of the research. The next section will explain the data analysis process, also based on Stringer's model (Stringer 2007, 99-104). Finally, given the participatory nature of Action Research (AR) in which the researcher forms an active part of the research, together with the cross-cultural nature of the project, the issues of power and trust will be addressed as part of the ethical considerations surrounding the project.

Research Methodology and Method

In the *Handbook of Action Research*, Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury describe action research as “a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes,

grounded in a participatory worldview” (Reason and Bradbury 2008, 1). Stringer adds an emphasis on applied research in his definition, “Action research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives” (Stringer 2007, 1). Rather than merely investigating what is happening, AR endeavors to understand how things are happening along with the subsequent impact on those involved in the issue (Stringer 2007, 19). Furthermore, AR not only seeks answers to practical situations in a specific context, but perhaps more importantly it aims to enhance people’s lives. In the words of Stringer, it is a “capacity-building process” (Stringer 2007, 20). Given the above advantages, I found AR to be a research methodology well suited to the context of leadership development within a local church and community.

Action Research Description

The heart of the AR process is a cycle of activity that guides the research. Although the iterative nature of AR is a common theme, between authors there exist slight variations in the description of this cycle. Coghlan and Brannick’s model describes AR as having four steps: constructing, planning action, taking action, and evaluating action (Coghlan and Brannick 2010, 8).

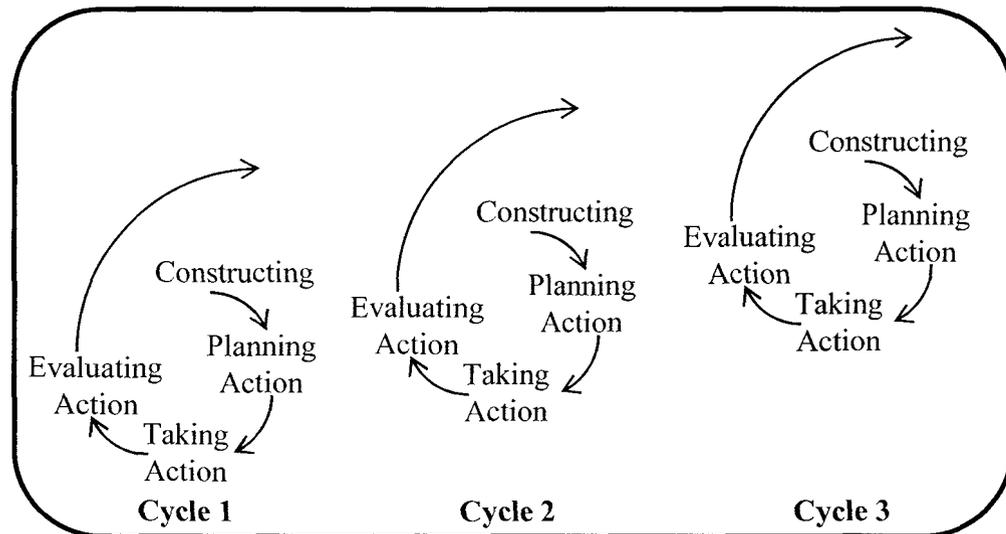


Figure 2. Coghlan and Brannick Action Research Model. Adapted from Coghlan and Brannick 2010.

Constructing the issue means developing an understanding of the project context and purpose primarily through dialogue with the involved parties, the researcher and project stakeholder(s). Once the issue has been framed and understood, a specific plan of action is formulated, carried out, and then evaluated. The evaluation leads to the start of another AR cycle (figure 2).

Stringer envisions the AR cycle in a similar but more concise manner: look, think, act. “Look” involves gathering information and building a description of what is happening; “Think” includes both analysis and interpretation of what has been observed; “Act” focuses on planning, implementation, and evaluation (Stringer 2007, 8). Like the previous description, this AR model repeats through various cycles (figure 3). Based primarily on the history and success of Stringer’s model among aboriginal people of Australia, I deemed his three-step process a good fit for this project.

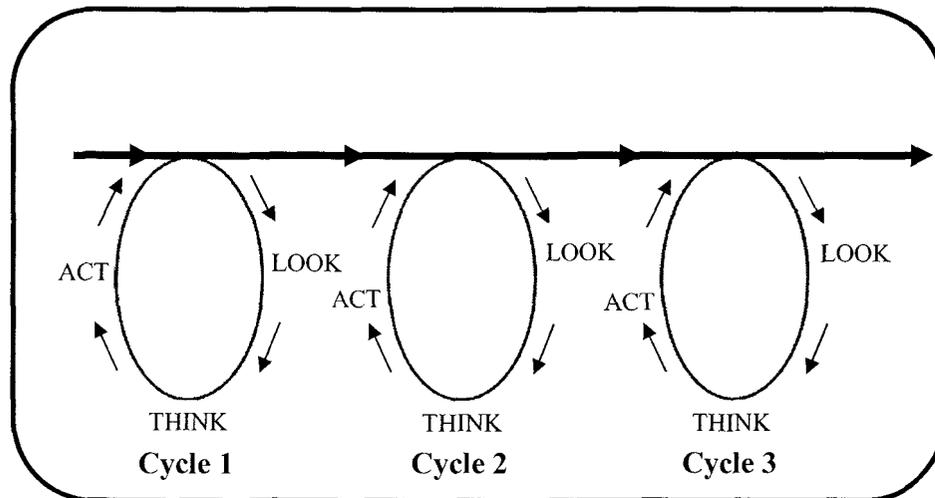


Figure 3. Stringer Action Research Model. Adapted from Stringer 2007.

Action Research Characteristics

Beyond the cyclical nature of AR, I will highlight three other characteristics of this research methodology. First, AR recognizes the researcher as an active participant in the process. As stated earlier, rather than simply providing objective observations of what is happening in a given context, AR acknowledges that the researcher will not only affect the process, but will also be affected by it. Coghlan and Brannick describe research in three voices: First person inquiry relates directly to the researcher, as one's own story or situation. Second person research moves beyond the researcher to work with others in exploring issues of mutual concern. The third person voice projects the research and information beyond those immediately affected by it, moving from a specific context to a more general application. AR strives to blend the three voices (Coghlan and Brannick 2010, 6). Toward that end, throughout the project I was keenly aware of the necessity that my role should be that of a facilitator-observer

more than a director of a study or program. The practical implications of this role varied slightly working through the three cycles of research, and in the following section I will describe in more detail how I participated in each aspect of the project.

Related to the role of the researcher, a defining characteristic of AR is that it is participatory in nature and thus grounded in a relationship between all those involved. Stringer describes AR as “a collaborative approach to investigation that seeks to engage ‘subjects’ as equal and full participants in the research process” (Stringer 2007, 10). The research project was based on a collaborative effort, which had its foundation in a growing relationship between the participants. Without this relational underpinning, the project would not have been possible nor even worth attempting.

A third critical, defining facet of the AR process is that it seeks to bring about change in a specific situation or context. Bell describes AR as applied research carried out by those who have identified a need for change (Bell 2006, 8). Stringer’s voice is more adamant: “If an action research project does not *make a difference*, in a specific way, for practitioners and/or their clients, then it has failed to achieve its objective” (Stringer 2007, 12). In the midst of this project, including the many ups and downs in participants’ energy and focus, the opportunity to make a difference gave momentum and hope to all those involved. At one point a participant exclaimed, “This (project) is such a great idea and I really want to see it be a great success with huge impact on our future, so I am just trying to be as helpful as I can!” The scope of this difference or change is not

only limited to a present-tense situation, however. Because of the cyclical nature of AR, action and evaluation should lead to further investigation, action, and evaluation. AR creates an opportunity for all participants to learn and grow, perhaps even in unintended ways. These growth points will be further outlined in Chapter 6.

Research Methods

With AR providing the methodological foundation for the research, the project involved a mixed approach in terms of method: Interview, Appreciative Inquiry, Force Field Analysis, and Cooperative Inquiry. Bell encourages the freedom and use of a variety of methods as long as they are undertaken with an understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of each one (Bell 2006, 24).

Although the style and purpose of an interview may vary, Stringer describes an interview as an informal conversation where the participant can “feel as if they can say what they are really thinking, or to express what they are really feeling” (Stringer 2007, 69). The goal of this process is to hear and understand what the participant thinks and feels about a topic or issue rather than to test a predetermined hypothesis. Bell categorizes interviews on a continuum of formality, ranging from an unstructured casual conversation to a highly structured encounter in which the interviewee is guided through a very specific list of questions and perhaps even given a limited choice of responses (Bell 2006, 161). The interviews conducted for this project fall toward the unstructured end between the two extremes of Bell’s continuum. Participants understood the topic

or focus of the conversation, but were given complete freedom to describe their personal journey and/or to express their thoughts on the matter.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is another way to allow people to express themselves while engaged in growth and change. Rather than pointing out what is wrong or looking at the negative side of an issue, AI “involves the art and practice of asking unconditionally positive questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate and heighten positive potential” (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005, 8). Participants in this project expressed a weariness and even anger at the negative focus on Native issues such as alcoholism or suicide in Alaskan villages. AI proved to be an excellent tool for approaching the matter of leadership development “through its focus on appreciation rather than pathologies and problems” (Coghlan and Brannick 2010, 47). Thus, leadership development could be approached through the four positive phases of AI: (1) Discovery—identifying the best of what has been and what is, (2) Dream—a vision of what could be, (3) Design—how to build upon existing strengths in order to realize the goal, and (4) Destiny—sustaining positive change (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005, 16). As discovered, positive examples of leadership among the Ahtna people exist in both the past and present, providing energy and momentum for future growth.

A third research method utilized in the project was the Force Field Analysis. Social psychologist Kurt Lewin designed this tool to highlight the forces pushing in favor of change and those that seek to maintain the status quo (Connelly 2014). Any given situation in a group, organization, or community maintains its present condition because these forces are held in balance.

Therefore, in order to bring about change, the equilibrium of the issue must be upset; factors which would drive change need to grow and/or that which opposes change must diminish. Examining a problem or situation using a Force Field Analysis consists of five basic steps: (1) Describe the issue and the desired change, (2) List the forces driving the change and those in opposition or restraining it, (3) Give a weighting to each force, (4) Determine which of the restraining forces can actually be worked on, and (5) Develop an action plan to reduce the obstacles or restraints to change (Coghlan and Brannick 2010, 140). Some would argue it is easier and more effective to reduce restraining forces rather than simply emphasizing the positive force(s) for change (Coghlan and Brannick 2010, 140). Therefore, a key component of the project was to understand, identify, and seek to reduce those obstacles which inhibit growth.

A final AR research method utilized in this project is Cooperative Inquiry. Heron and Reason define this method as “a form of...action research in which all participants work together in an inquiry group as co-researchers and co-subjects” (Heron and Reason 2008, 366). The process is described in the following steps:

1. The group talks about the group’s interests and concerns, agrees on the focus of the inquiry, and develops together a set of questions or proposals its members wish to explore.
2. The group applies actions in the everyday work of the members...and observes and records the outcomes of their own and each other’s behavior.
3. The group members as co-researchers become fully immersed in their experience. They may deepen into the experience or they may be led away from the original ideas and proposals into new fields, unpredicted action and creative insights.
4. After an agreed period engaged in phases 2 and 3, the co-researchers reassemble to consider their original questions in light of their experience. (Reason 1999, 187-203)

One example of an extended period of Cooperative Inquiry is the Origins Event described in the following section.

The Research Process

It is with the preceding AR principles in mind that I now describe my research project. “Framing an issue can be a complex process” (Coghlan and Brannick 2010, 53). When attempting to understand a situation in another culture, the complexity multiplies; such was my experience as I began to explore Christian leadership formation among the Ahtna people. As a result, framing the issue itself became part of the research process, particularly in the first AR cycle. Following the results of the initial conversations and interviews, the project developed into two research tracks—Origins and Community—for the second and third AR cycles. Each cycle included Look, Think and Act steps which then dictated the subsequent phase of research. The admonition that action researchers need to go with the story as it evolves proved to be true in this project (Coghlan and Brannick 2010, 55).

Project Diagram

The research process is illustrated by the diagram (figure 4) on the following page which uses Stringer’s three-step AR model.

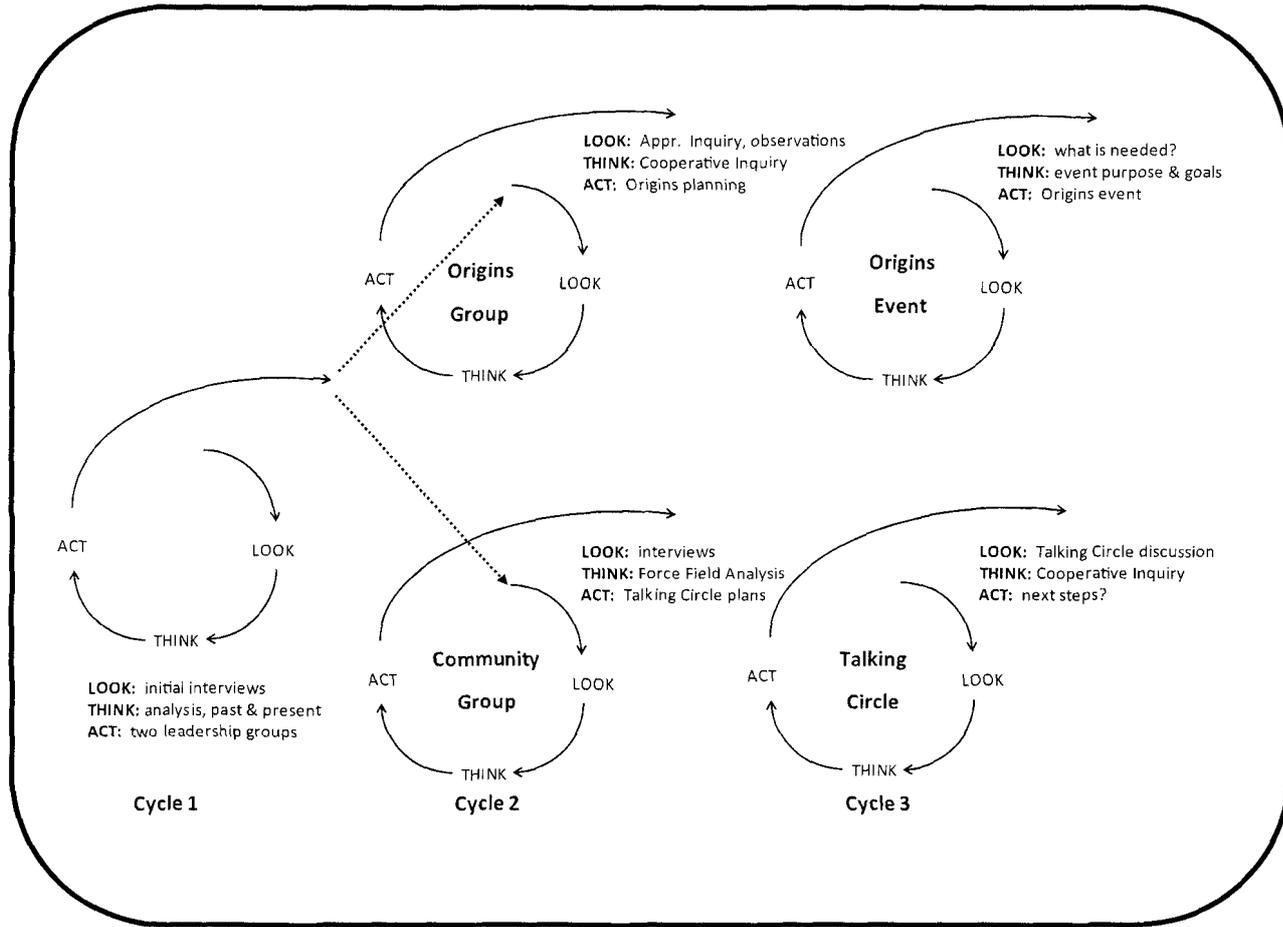


Figure 4. Complete Project Diagram. Project AR Cycles.

The Importance of Relationships

If this research project were a house, the foundation upon which all else rests is the concept of relationship. Stringer describes AR as a “sociable research process,” one that is built upon relationships, and my project proved this description true (Stringer 2007, 60). From start to finish, the project relied on personal relationships, both past and present. Several aspects of history were important: (1) My own experience growing up in the Copper Valley created a connecting point with people. I had gone to the same school with the same people, knew them, and had lived together through notable events. (2) The identity and relationship of my parents with people in the area also played a significant role. One participant said to me, “My dad said your parents were good people,” and because of that he agreed to engage in the project. (3) Past ministry experience gave me a level of trust and credibility with people. This, in turn, opened further doors of opportunity. The fact that Person X trusted me enough to introduce me to Person Y served to broaden the base of inquiry. Perhaps none of these factors from my past would have been an absolute necessity for a project of this nature, but taken together they laid an important relational foundation.

The project could not stand on past relationships alone; it also required fostering connections in the present. Although at times the line between research and a friendly visit, between formal and informal discussion could be blurred, I estimate that I spent nearly 200 hours engaged with people in this project. That time contributed to the personal relationships that form the foundation of the

project. I would add that these relationships continue to flourish, something which offers hope for the ongoing nature of this work.

First Action Research Cycle—Interviews

To again use a building analogy, if relationships formed the project's foundation, then it must be said that Personal Interviews framed the house. This began the "Look" phase of the first AR cycle.

First Cycle—Look

Before any group work or extended discussion began, I conducted 15 interviews with individuals, 7 men and 8 women ranging in age from 26 to 75. The interviews took place between August and December, 2013. The initial interviews were based on leadership position within the community, church, and the Ahtna Corporation. Subsequent conversations followed a pattern of suggestion and connection: "Who else should I talk to about this topic?" (Stringer 2007, 47). As a result, interviewees included past and present leaders in the Ahtna Corporation, church elders, tribal leaders, community coordinators, teachers, public safety personnel, and individuals considered to be emerging leaders. With the exception of two phone conversations, I conducted the interviews in person.

Stringer portrays an interview as an informal conversation, an opportunity "for participants to describe the situation in their own terms" (Stringer 2007, 69). Given that model and the cultural context in which I was working, my primary goal was to let people tell their story, a story which often included life history,

important events, memories of significant leaders in the community, along with personal failure and achievement. I desired to give a general focus to the conversation without shaping or limiting the response. Further prompts helped to clarify key points: “Tell me more about...” I also guarded against following my own agenda in these conversations, endeavoring to allow participants to fully express their thoughts and feelings (Stringer 2007, 69). Sometimes a respondent helped with that process. During one interview, a participant gave me a stern look and declared, “The most important thing for a growing leader to do is to sit and listen!” I got the message.

Capturing interview data proved challenging. At times, an audio recorder served as the primary means of gathering data, but often I felt the use of a device would be culturally/socially inappropriate. In those situations, I relied on written field notes.

First Cycle—Think

Following the Look phase in this initial AR cycle, I engaged in the second step—Think. Stringer outlines two primary means of analyzing and interpreting the data: (1) a categorizing and coding process that identifies and organizes the information into categories, and (2) identifying key experiences and/or events and analyzing the elements that comprise them (Stringer 2007, 98). In this research phase I primarily utilized categorizing and coding, a process I describe in detail later in this chapter.

First Cycle—Act

A crucial transition occurred during the Act phase in the first AR cycle, which shaped the course of the rest of the project. Participants expressed a desire for action; they wanted to see something happen. For example, during one interview the individual declared, “This is the right time for leadership development among the young adults of the Ahtna people.” Some participants wanted to be directly involved in the process while others expressed support and pointed out key individuals for further follow up. At my suggestion, those who wanted to take an active role in exploring the theme of leadership development gathered into two groups. One became known as the Origins group while the other was labeled the Community group. Thus, the primary action point flowing from the first cycle was the formation of two subsequent research tracks, each creating their own AR cycles.

Second Action Research Cycle—Origins Group

One research track became known as the Origins group, so named for the event the group would later plan and carry out. Throughout the course of the research, group size ranged from 4-6 participants most of whom were Ahtna individuals living in Anchorage. It also included input from two individuals in the Copper Valley. Travel and residence between the Copper Valley and Anchorage are fluid in nature. Ahtna people—and others—will move to Anchorage for work, school, and/or personal reasons, often staying for an undetermined length of time, while remaining connected with their community.

Origins—Look

The Look phase for the Origins group involved extended times of both Appreciative Inquiry and Cooperative Inquiry, carried out in a series of 11 meetings between January-July, 2014. I acted as facilitator of this process primarily by asking questions. Early in the discussion process, examples of past leaders along with the power and importance of Ahtna culture repeatedly surfaced. Stories of past leaders like Jim McKinley, Harry Johns, and Ben Neeley highlighted the importance of community service. In contrast the lack of leadership among Ahtna young men was expressed in a cultural context:

- “People are disconnected from their roots, searching for meaning.”
- “Culture brings meaning and something to be proud of, while alcohol brings apathy.”
- “At the last potlatch I attended I noticed the young men didn’t know what to do and weren’t serving their people.”

Origins—Think

The natural flow of group discussion turned to a Think process by asking two questions: (1) “Why is this [young men disconnected from their culture and not serving their community] happening?” (2) “What can be done about it?” Although the group highlighted many possible factors contributing to the situation facing young Ahtna men, two that continued to surface were an inappropriate use of technology (e.g. the Internet and video games), and a lack of mentors and role models. One group member stated, “I’m having a hard time even thinking of any mentors for young men in our community.” The discussion continued to come

back to the need for a solution; fully recognizing that an issue this complex would not be solved by a one time, one size fits all solution.

Origins—Act

As a result of the group's thinking and discussion, the primary action point in this cycle was the creation of an event known as Origins. (See Appendix A for event planning documents and sample promotional materials.) As conceived by the group, Origins became an event designed to give direction to young men and develop their individual responsibility within the community. To accomplish this purpose, the planning group developed the idea of taking a group of invited participants into a wilderness setting for several days in order to focus on four key words or leadership themes: inspiration, responsibility, overcoming failure, and purpose. Daily activities would include a biblical story from the life of David, stories of past Ahtna leaders, drumming/singing, and working on a group project connected with Ahtna culture, such as building a fish smoker and/or sweat bath.

Evaluation, again, played a critical role at this point in the AR cycle because this served as a springboard and guide into the next cycle. First, for this group, and in some respects even the larger community, an event like Origins was a new idea. None of the group members had ever planned or participated in something like this, so the ideas briefly described in the preceding paragraphs took hours of discussion to conceive. The planning process alone—the interaction and collaboration while persevering toward a goal— became a critical part of the leadership journey for these participants. Furthermore, I do not want to give the

impression that the work of the Origins group was smooth, uninterrupted, or conflict free. At times, individual work schedules made gathering together difficult. Group members would forget commitments or change plans, derailing a scheduled meeting. Life events, such as a death in someone's extended family, could dominate the group's discussion resulting in little thought or planning toward the Origins event. Jealousy, conflict, and disagreement were all part of the group experience.

Perhaps most importantly, as will be further discussed in Chapter 5, even though the participants focused on developing leadership traits in others, they were themselves growing and emerging as leaders. A critical tipping point occurred here. At various points in the journey, opportunities surfaced for individuals, myself included, to hijack the process—to take control and become the leader of the upcoming Origins event. For example, as the group appeared to lose focus or struggled with waning enthusiasm, the easiest step would have been for me to (re)assume my role as a Christian ministry leader and start giving direction to the project. Other community leaders who had expressed interest in the idea could have done the same. On the surface, the Origins concept was not complicated—to plan a leadership mentoring event for young men in a wilderness setting. However, the danger here would have been to turn this process into another top down program, something that would have significantly derailed the growth and change in the group members. Rather than taking control, I followed Stringer's model by maintaining the role of facilitator-observer described earlier while continuing to use questions in order to reengage the group effort. My firmly

deciding to leave the power, control, and ownership of the idea with the group not only enhanced the members' development as leaders, but it also contributed to the uniqueness of the events to follow.

Third Action Research Cycle—Origins Event

The actual Origins event became the third cycle of research in the project. I had previously discussed with the group members my possible role in this experience, expressing my willingness to participate in whatever way the group considered best, including not attending the event. The Origins members were adamant that I continue to engage with the group as both participant and observer. In the weeks leading up to the event, various circumstances threatened to undo the entire process. Work and family issues made it impossible for the planning group to meet together. One key project participant was forced to temporarily abandon the project because of a change in work schedule. Communication and planning became a challenge. However, through these difficulties I observed the group's resolve stiffen. One member declared, "This is so important we're going to do it no matter what happens." By persevering in this way, the three day Origins experience began on June 25, 2014 with a group of six participants—three mentors accompanied by three teen mentees.

Origins Event Setting

Strelna Lake Wilderness Camp is located between the remote communities of Chitina and McCarthy in south central Alaska, approximately a

one-hour hike off the road. The facilities are very basic but adequate—a few permanent structures and cabins along with a cook shack and a gazebo-like chapel—all set in a picturesque lakeshore context. Opportunities for recreation primarily revolve around the lake, including canoeing, fishing, and swimming. Recent heavy rain made the trail conditions rough, but there was good weather, safety on the trail, and no encounters with bears.

Origins Event Observations

As a participant-observer in the Origins event, I offer the following summary of this three-day experience. First, I saw mentoring take place throughout the event in a variety of ways. As odd as it may seem, the teen participants, all of whom live in a somewhat remote Alaskan community, had little wilderness knowledge or experience. One of the Origins leaders naturally began to teach the group various skills, such as trail safety, fire starting, and fish cleaning and preparation. Perhaps in the past these means of survival would have been part of an individual's upbringing, but for the teens in this group, it was a new experience. It is also important to note the transformation I witnessed in the Origins leader through this process. By his own admission, this person has struggled in life with various addictions and family issues. He has commented about feeling out of place in many educational or work-related contexts. Yet, in this scenario, he could assume and model a leadership role using skills taught to him by his father and grandfather. Mentoring and teaching were not limited to wilderness survival skills, but rather included a wide range of topics such as

handling peer pressure, making wise life choices, honoring God with one's life, and processing difficult or tragic life events in a healthy way. The mentors primarily communicated by sharing personal life stories and referring to the example of Ahtna elders all in the context of casual conversation around the camp fire or while engaged in another activity. There was very little direct or overt teaching time.

Related to the leadership and mentoring style that unfolded during the trip, I observed and experienced an almost completely unstructured camp format and schedule. In the words of one Origins leader, "Let's just let things naturally unfold." However, within that freedom, the group made decisions, acted, and did most things together; waking, sleeping, meals, and activities all occurred this way. No doubt enjoying over 19 hours of daylight at this time of year in Alaska helped facilitate this process. However, it also felt right to the participants. One of the teens commented that he only came to the event when he realized it would not be highly structured like his past camp experiences. Thus, time at camp became a naturally flowing blend of conversation, canoeing, fishing, meals, and sleep.

Finally, I observed that the camp setting provided a context for all the participants to openly share thoughts, ideas, and questions with one another. Perhaps a variety of factors contributed to this environment: (1) the relatively small group, (2) the absence of outside interference, such as cell phones or TV, (3) the opportunity to engage in enjoyable group activities, and (4) the relaxed structure of the schedule. One mentor commented, "[Person A] never talks to anyone, but look at him now, he's having a blast with everyone." Real life

questions about issues and struggles provided opportunity to share biblical truth. Deep issues related to death, tragedy, the spirit world, and struggles with self-esteem all came into the open in the course of conversation. The format of the event seemed to provide an excellent opportunity for leading the young men to consider biblical truth applied to a wide array of life situations. Further evaluation and group reaction will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Second Action Research Cycle—Community Group

As indicated earlier, a second group of individuals wanting to take an active role in exploring leadership development surfaced from the first AR cycle of interviews. The second AR track that developed in the project was the Community group. I interacted with this group of 4 individuals between December 2013 and April 2014; they developed and functioned in several distinct ways when compared to Origins. First, the Community group was comprised entirely of Ahtna residents of the Copper Valley. They were not disconnected or unknown to the Origins participants; in fact, there was some crossover between the two. But living in a more isolated setting away from Anchorage seemed to lend a slightly different perspective on issues. Second, as the facilitator I was more disconnected from this group due to the distance. This factor created difficulties in communication, networking, relationship building, and scheduling—all of which resulted in a much slower group development process. Third, and this is only a perception, while the Origins group grew in its determination to make an impact among the people with more developed ideas,

the Community group seemed to struggle with apathy or resignation to the status quo. For example, it became harder for the group to meet together and members' interest in pursuing ideas or action plans seemed to wane. Perhaps this attitude reflected the surrounding context. One participant stated, "When I talk to people about leadership or making a difference in our community, they just respond with 'How come?' People are only interested if something directly benefits them."

In spite of these obstacles, the Community group made significant progress. I anticipate as much lasting impact from the ongoing work of this group as from the Origins track as I will explain in the following chapters.

The Community Group—Look, Think, Act

From a research perspective, Look and Think for the Community group first took the form of interviews and discussion. Flowing from that work, the idea emerged to hold a Talking Circle focused on culture and leadership. For the Ahtna people, a Talking Circle is an avenue whereby people can gather to express opinions and listen to those of others. It is a type of open forum. Although not a formal decision-making body, it does serve the purpose of allowing a broad base of people to express opinions, feelings, and ideas. Typically, the participants come focused on a particular topic, although that may be very general and serve only as a starting point. This is not a time for debate or judgment, but rather an opportunity to share ideas and listen to others. In this case, the Community group determined that it would be good to have one or more of the elders present to talk

about leadership from their perspective, and to hold the Talking Circle in a retreat-type setting.

The Community Group—Proposed Third Cycle

This action step led to the next AR cycle where the Look phase encountered some difficulties with the Talking Circle idea: (1) Who should be invited to an “off-site” event like this? (2) Would it be men only or a mixed group, or maybe a combination of separate gatherings and then coming together? (3) Would the presence of an elder foster or inhibit discussion? Some participants felt like the presence of an elder turns a Talking Circle into a teaching event and people tend to “shut down.” (4) Given the fluid nature of village life, how far in advance can this event be planned to fit the schedule of the few retreat center options available to us? Clearly, more discussion was needed, and the group entered the Think phase of the cycle by working through a period of Cooperative Inquiry. It was determined that proceeding with small steps—informal conversations, evening gatherings in someone’s home, and a small scale talking circle which included a village elder—would pave the way toward a larger, weekend event at the retreat center focused on leadership discussion and growth.

As a result of this interaction, the Community group proposed the following course of action: to continue informal conversations with the goal of seeking those individuals interested in having an impact in their community. These people would then be gathered for a group discussion, perhaps hosted by the Ahtna Heritage Foundation, and led by Ms. Liana Charley John who could

serve as the catalyst or sponsor for future events. Much of the work of the Community group still lies before it, but I am encouraged by the group's determination to see progress in the area of leadership development. Future implications rising from the initial work of the Community group will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Data Analysis

Stringer's model utilizes two primary data analysis processes: categorizing and coding, and the "unpacking" of key experiences (Stringer 2007, 98).

Categorizing and coding is a six-step process: (1) reviewing the data, (2) unitizing the data, (3) categorizing and coding, (4) identifying themes, (5) organizing a category system, and (6) creating a report framework. The second process identifies key experiences and analyzes them by examining the primary features, elements, and themes that make up each experience (Stringer 2007, 99-104).

Given the relational nature of this AR project, individual conversation and group discussion often included sharing current life events, family news, activities and future plans. In reviewing the data gathered throughout the project I endeavored to carefully sift through these comments in order to identify data pertinent to the topic of leadership (Stringer 2007, 100). Following this review, I separated the data into units made up of phrases or sentences. For example, in the course of talking about drumming and singing a participant made the statement, "Culture brings meaning, something to be proud of, but alcoholism creates

apathy.” That sentence was broken into two units of data related to culture and the issue of alcohol abuse. The result of this analysis yielded 174 units of data.

The next step was to code the units of data. In this part of the process I identified the following codes: (1) a description of leadership, (2) factors contributing to leadership development, (3) obstacles to leadership growth, (4) gender issues related to leadership, (5) the role of culture, and (6) the role of faith in the life of a leader. Upon further review of the coded data, I categorized related information together, leading to the themes further described in Chapter 5: (1) an Ahtna description of leadership, (2) cultural identity and community, (3) the impact of cataclysmic experiences, describing obstacles to leadership growth, and (4) the role of faith.

The data analysis process also incorporated triangulation, the “inclusion of perspectives from diverse sources” (Stringer 2007, 58). By comparing the data from interviews with the interaction of the Origins and Community groups, I was able to confirm the credibility of the responses as well as to note differences of perspective between participants. One example of diverse opinions which I describe further in Chapter 5 is how the two groups wanted to incorporate (or not) the participation of community elders. Triangulation provided clarity in examining the responses throughout the research project.

The project also included an experience, the Origins event, which I have labeled as a “key experience” (Stringer 2007, 98). A second event, a leadership-themed Talking Circle, was planned by the Community group, but for reasons outlined in Chapter 5 it did not take place. (This “non-event” also provided further

insight into the research process.) Again Stringer's analysis process proved to be helpful in evaluating the data gathered through observations of the Origins event. In Chapter 5 I discuss this experience from the perspective of the participants (myself included) while drawing out the primary features of this activity focused around the theme of mentoring.

Research Ethics and the Issue of Power

The exercise of personal power may depend on one's title, position, or authority, but it may also be a matter of perception. That is to say, if an individual is perceived to have power or status, they may wield more influence in a given situation than they realize. This power, in turn, can create issues of trust.

Power and Trust

In his discussion of power and trust, Episcopal priest Eric Law describes the danger of being unaware of one's perceived power by illustrating the tragic history of the interaction between European settlers and North American Indians (Law 1993, 55). Early pioneers in North America typically came from a context where they experienced persecution, yet they failed to understand their new position of power relative to North American Native people. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire highlights a related issue by putting a spotlight on the issue of withholding trust. That is, it is possible for a well-intentioned individual to operate with the underlying assumption that they alone are capable to be the agents of change. He states, "They talk about the people, but they do not trust

them; and trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change” (Freire 2000, 60).

Both of these issues—unperceived power and withholding trust—have direct bearing on Christian ministry in general and this project in particular. Personal observation throughout several decades of Christian service has led me to conclude that missionaries struggle with the issues of power and trust more than they realize. The missionary may feel that they come with a “servant attitude,” but because of skin color, education, and real or perceived status within the church they may unknowingly find themselves in a position of power and influence. However, if Freire’s admonition is followed, trust, which leads to empowering others, is critical in the transformation process.

My Role as Researcher

Understanding the relationship between power and trust carried significant importance for this project. I understood that I would have more formal education and organizational leadership experience than most of the participants. However, both the heart of AR and the project goal pushed me to work at maintaining the role of a facilitator throughout the project. This meant that the participants guided and carried the process. The purpose of AR is to provide people a means to engage in inquiry and work towards an appropriate solution (Stringer 2007, 6). While the role of the researcher may be just one of several ethical considerations, it was a primary concern.

Ethical Considerations

The project followed appropriate guidelines for research ethics concerning work among Alaska's aboriginal people as outlined by the Alaska Federation of Natives (Appendix C). It also adhered to the TCPS 2 standards of ethical conduct for research among Aboriginal people groups. (See Appendix C for further explanation of the ethical standards which guided this project.) In addition to the issue of power dynamics discussed earlier, here I will only briefly highlight and summarize the important ethical consideration of informed consent. Stringer defines this as a process requiring "those responsible for the study to provide written information about the aims, purposes, and processes of the study and to gain written acknowledgment of participants' willingness to participate" (Stringer 2007, 55). For the project, this process also included an individual's right to refuse or withdraw from participation without consequence, as well as the option to talk to someone in an Ahtna leadership position if they had questions about the research. Every participant in the project gave their verbal and/or written permission to use their input as part of the research. The idea of written consent at times actually introduced an uncomfortable element in the process. Individuals' voluntary participation was based largely on a trusting relationship, and they understood that they could withdraw or refuse to engage in the project at any time. For some, to sign a document indicated a lack of trust. In the words of one participant, "Indians don't like to sign papers!" Nevertheless, after hearing a description of the project and the goals of the research, participants understood

the ethical requirements of academia and acquiesced. Informed consent provided an important ethical safeguard to the project.

To summarize, Action Research provided a cyclical, collaborative and change-focused methodology which I used to explore the topic of leadership development among the Ahtna people. This three-cycle AR project used Stringer's model for both research process and data analysis and followed all appropriate ethical guidelines. This led to the findings and outcomes described in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS, OUTCOMES AND INTERPRETATIONS

The findings and outcomes presented in this chapter emerged as a result of following Stringer's guidelines for categorizing and coding data along with analysis of key experiences described in the previous chapter. Through this process, I have grouped the data into four primary categories or themes followed by an interpretation of the data. The final section of this chapter will describe and evaluate the outcomes from the Origins and Talking Circle events.

Project Findings

Utilizing Stringer's process, I have organized the research findings into the following categories: (1) an Ahtna description of leadership, (2) the role of cultural identity and community in leadership development, (3) the impact of cataclysmic events, and (4) the importance of faith.

An Ahtna Description of Leadership

As they discussed the concept of leadership, participants used defining words and phrases as well as pointing to a role model, someone they considered a leader. For example, in the process of talking about leadership, an individual might have referred to Traditional Chief Ben Neeley. Follow up conversation

would then center on the qualities that made Ben a good leader. When describing a leader or the idea of leadership, participants used the following phrases, many of which were repeated numerous times by a variety of individuals:

- Provides and contributes to the community
- Helps people
- Provides for people
- One who gives guidance and answers
- Sober (no issues of alcohol abuse)
- Serves others
- A role model
- Not necessarily a titled position or individual
- Always there to help, such as with moose hunting or a potlatch
- One who does not put themselves out front
- One who shows love, care, and kindness to others by serving the community
- Non-judgmental but not afraid to correct others
- Grounded in faith

The Origins group further defined their perspective on leadership by identifying four characteristics necessary for good leadership: (1) inspiration, from Scripture and elders, (2) responsibility to the community, (3) overcoming failure, and (4) having purpose in life.

Since the focus of the project aimed to discover fundamentals of leadership, I gave no added qualifiers to the conversation or group interaction such as church, organizational, or tribal in regards to the term “leadership.” As a result, participants were encouraged to think through and express their basic understanding of the word or concept. Often, a descriptive phrase would be followed by a real life example and a story of how someone demonstrated that particular leadership quality, usually in either a community or church setting.

Frequently, the life example was an elder or someone who held community-wide respect.

From these findings, how may the Ahtna perspective on the basic concept of leadership be interpreted? Service in the context of community forms the foundation of this idea. Personal stories regularly included examples of a leader stopping by the house with moose meat or making sure there was enough firewood. People would recall instances when they needed advice or guidance and a leader was there to listen and share. The leader's impact on the community as a role model forms another important aspect of the description. One participant declared, "I look at [a certain individual] and I want to be like him." I also took note of what was not mentioned. Other than the generic term "elder," no title was ever mentioned in connection with leadership, whether religious, corporate, or academic. A person's employment or position at work seemed to matter little, if at all. Educational achievements were another non-factor. In fact, a participant with one of the highest levels of education in the entire research group stated, "My people totally ignored my education." No formal process or developmental program ever entered the discussion when considering the image of a leader. Gifts, skills, or special abilities, although perhaps working in the background, did not surface in the leadership description. Rather, the picture that emerges is of leadership that is founded upon character-based service to the community. One participant declared, "I don't really like the word leader. It makes me think of a solo, up front, pushy person." Another stated, "I don't think we should talk about leadership development. I like to think of it as character development."

Another description of leadership that can be drawn from the data encompasses the ideas of life wisdom, guidance, and the knowledge required to make good choices. In the Ahtna context, an individual exercises leadership by modeling a life of wisdom and in turn offering that guidance to others. This could come in the form of correcting a younger person, but often it simply meant sharing a truth or giving guidance when asked in the course of conversation. Underestimating this role in the life of the community is a mistake. When speaking with an elderly woman, someone I considered wise and experienced herself, she told me how much she missed being able to talk with some of the now deceased elders. "I need their wisdom!" It is also important to understand that making good choices does not mean a mistake-free life. In this regard, several participants noted that most of the elders had struggled at some point with alcohol abuse, but had now recovered. Moreover, what some might consider a life failure, such as substance abuse or immoral behavior, would not forever exclude one from leadership. Rather, what is considered vital is the journey to recovery and learning from those mistakes. A similar theme of overcoming failure surfaced in the Origins group's discussions. Good counsel and life wisdom, therefore, characterize the Ahtna leader's contribution to the community.

Cultural Identity and Community

The second major category surfacing in the research data highlights the role of community and cultural identity in the leadership formation process. If leadership is not the result of education, a program, or someone's self-promotion,

how do individuals develop and emerge as leaders within the Ahtna community? The words of one participant sum up a dominant theme in the research data: “You do it as a group.” Connectedness and interaction with the community marked every description of leaders, past and present. Relationships matter more than geographic location. Nearly one third of the research participants currently live in Anchorage while many others have spent significant amounts of time living outside the Copper Valley. Ahtna movement to and from Anchorage seems to ebb and flow for varying periods of time. While physical absence may influence the strength of certain relationships, of even greater importance is maintaining contact and participation in key community events like a potlatch. “You don’t abandon people. You’re there when they need you,” shared one group member.

However, several research participants felt the need to purposely distance themselves from their community for temporary periods of time, knowing that by doing so they risked damaging relationships. At times, the idea of this distance was conveyed in a positive way: “People need to get an outside view in order to better serve their community.” “Go out and get an outside perspective. Find out why Ahtna is so special.” At other times, the need for separation arose from negative circumstances: “My life was so messed up I knew I had to get away from my people for a while.” “I felt rejected so I walked away from it all.” In every case, whether the circumstances were positive or negative, these individuals returned to the community intent on connecting and serving in that context. The issue of distance and connectedness in terms of community relationship contains parallels to the idea of fusion and differentiation explored in Chapter 3 and further

summarized in Chapter 6. Whether done for positive or negative reasons, the ability to gain outside perspective while remaining connected to the community fits the description of growth in self-differentiation, a critical characteristic of strong leadership (Steinke 2006, 12).

Closely related to connectedness with one's community is the importance of having a strong cultural identity. Research group members repeatedly made pointed statements illustrating this concept as shown by this sample of their comments:

- "You have to know who you are."
- "Leadership is connected to identity."
- "Culture brings meaning, something to be proud of."
- "Believing in your culture gives great strength."

Their words were reinforced by action. One day, I accompanied several of the research participants on a visit to a homeless shelter in Anchorage where they wanted to drum and sing Ahtna songs. In addressing a large crowd of over 100 people, over half of whom were aboriginal people from various parts of Alaska, the leader of the group said, "We want these songs to encourage you by helping you connect with your own culture and identity." The impact of the songs and drumming on the Native members of the audience was electric. It was obvious, even to bystanders. A staff member commented to me, "This group is doing a good thing here. You can see that people sit up and take notice. It's like the drum and songs take them to a different place." The power of cultural identity was evident even in a group made up of people from diverse backgrounds.

Further testimony to the importance of identity came in the form of negative statements from those fearing that people have forgotten their culture. Some individuals worry that “the power of language and culture has been lost to the Ahtna people,” leaving them with a sense of diminished ability to find meaning.

The research discovered that community and culture could also have a negative side. If participant responses frequently indicated the importance of leaders as role models, nearly as often people pointed out the community’s current lack of role models:

- “There is no one to look up to, no younger leaders.”
- “We don’t have role models, people lack confidence and self-worth.”
- “Too many people are disconnected from their roots.”
- “I’m having trouble thinking of any people who could act as mentors.”

Clearly, the community is struggling in this area. The lack of role models has become a critical issue. Several female participants commented that men are not stepping up to serve as role models. The Origins group also addressed this issue. Many of its members voiced concern that they themselves had few if any role models, and that a younger generation of potential future leaders has no one to follow. Creating a solution to this problem became one of the major goals of the Origins group.

Another area in which the community and culture has had a negative impact concerns women’s leadership roles. I found that nearly every female participant in the study raised this topic in some way, while the male group

members and interviewees were silent on the matter. Very strong words and statements from the research participants came to light during our discussions:

- “We will never heal as a people if we allow people (women) to be treated horribly like dogs.”
- “The lack of women in leadership is a major obstacle to growth among our people.”
- “I don’t want to go back to a male dominated culture.”

The Origins group, who admittedly focused on developing young male leaders, basically chose to ignore the topic by rebuffing repeated offers from women in leadership roles to speak to the group from their perspective. The treatment of women has been an area where the sense of community became counter-productive. A desire not to do anything that would appear to harm the community or shed negative light on people in turn created a code of silence regarding what was taking place. Speaking of the experience from a previous generation, one participant remarked, “Our culture hid the deviance.” The research participants agreed that the overt treatment of women has improved from the past, but their perception of being excluded from traditional leadership roles remains a challenge for Ahtna women.

The research findings on the role of culture and community lead me to the following primary interpretation: In the Ahtna context, effective leadership emerges within the community and is exercised by individuals who are rooted in their culture. Ideally, the emerging leader develops over time through an informal process of mentoring and role modeling. However, challenges arise if this largely internal process breaks down. Commenting on this situation, a Native Alaskan Christian leader used a baseball analogy and remarked, “The farm team is not

producing.” Every participant in the study raised the issue of a lack of adequate leadership.

The Impact of Cataclysmic Experiences

The pursuit of reasons or causes for the breakdown in natural leadership development led to the third major category of data from the research: the occurrence and effect of cataclysmic events. A cataclysm may be defined as “a violent upheaval, especially of a political, military or social nature” (Collins World English Dictionary). An example of such an event would be the first contact between Anglo-European explorers/settlers and North American Native people groups. This occurred at different times and in various ways across the continent. It was an event beyond the control of Native people, yet it altered the course of their history and culture.

On a local scale, my research indicates at least three such experiences have brought major upheaval to the Ahtna people, the effects of which are still being felt today and which have direct bearing on their current leadership situation. First, although not a specific, one-time event, the cumulative effect of alcohol abuse has been nothing short of cataclysmic. Research participants repeatedly made statements pointing to the critical nature of this issue: “Alcohol has decimated generations of my people, especially men.” In his life testimony (Appendix B), Traditional Chief Ben Neeley stated, “Our parents used to have good homes, but, because of drinking, the houses rotted or burned and the people lived in tents.” Not a single person contacted during this project had been

unaffected by the abuse of alcohol and/or other substances. Many of the group members are recovering alcoholics and drug users; some were former drug dealers in the community. The contrast could not be more stark when considering the previously discussed image of a leader—someone who serves and helps the entire community—as compared with the damage wrought by alcohol abuse. In the words of one participant, “Alcohol has cut down multiple generations of Native men.”

A second event deepened the impact of alcohol and substance abuse. In the mid-1970's, the Trans-Alaska pipeline was constructed to carry oil from the northern coast of Alaska across the state to the port of Valdez for shipment to refineries. A portion of the pipeline crosses Ahtna territory, and many tribal members participated in some way in the construction project. This project brought unprecedented wealth into the region, but with that financial gain came societal devastation. Research participants referred to the “Pipeline Generation” as a group swept away by the massive influx of alcohol and drugs. One group member explained, “The pipeline brought money, drugs, and death. Living by traditional culture takes patience; money tries to take a short cut.” The Pipeline Generation, itself lost or floundering, raised the next generation largely disconnected from their roots, leading to a significant breakdown in the traditional community mentoring process.

Finally, the research raised the issue of sexual abuse at the hands of church and other religious leaders as something that brought upheaval to the Alaskan Native community at large. Physical and sexual abuse unleashes tragic

consequences in the lives of all those affected. The project did not delve into specific stories or cases of abuse on a local level. What surfaced in the research as having an impact on the community was a general feeling of broken trust. “Deep in the native world there is real mistrust of the church because of all the abuse,” declared one group member. At a time when their world was experiencing the turmoil of cultural upheaval combined with the onslaught of alcohol and drugs, the entity looked to for strength and stability by Native people proved to be profoundly untrustworthy. Although people may not have lost faith in God, the impact of broken trust lingers and affects their perspective on the church and its leadership.

How might the effects of these cataclysmic events be interpreted? First and foremost, there is the necessity and willingness to confront them as reality. The fact that these issues surfaced in the research indicates that, at least in part, the Ahtna people are prepared to do that. One participant commented that, “My people are ready to rise up from the knockdown blow we took from alcohol.” This attitude paves the way for the pursuit and implementation of culturally relevant solutions (Chapter 6). Furthermore, Christian organizations must face the truth of the upheaval these events have caused. As simple as this may sound, it is not always comfortable. For this project, I functioned primarily as an AR facilitator. However, I am also a Caucasian member of a mission organization and thus I represent part of the cause of the damage and upheaval. This raises the issue of how to rebuild trust that has been broken, and by so doing, to encourage a healing process that will restore the community’s capability to raise healthy leaders from

within. It also highlights the importance of building a solid spiritual foundation, one which can overcome difficult obstacles in the journey to leadership.

The Importance of Faith

A final category of data emerging from the project highlights the connection between leadership and faith. The participants often spoke of the two in close relationship to one another, especially as they described the current situation as well as the recent past. Men like Ben Neeley, Harry Johns, and Jim McKinley, all now deceased, provided strong faith-based leadership to the Ahtna people. Their function as community elders and pastors, while at times difficult to specifically define, was described by one research participant as that of a “shepherd.” The same is said of current Traditional Chief Fred Ewan. Likewise, a younger generation of emerging leaders demonstrates a desire to grow in faith and to seek God. The Origins group believed getting closer to God is a key aspect of leadership mentoring.

However, a factor affecting faith and leadership is the dichotomy between an individual’s intentions to move forward in their faith journey, and actual, visible spiritual growth. A group member flatly stated, “Our men are lacking in spirituality.” Furthermore, a desire to grow closer to God or even to provide faith-based leadership does not always seem to translate into local church involvement. Although the broken trust issue may contribute to this situation, other factors surfaced in the research. Some do not perceive the local church in its current form as being connected with Native culture. One participant, admittedly not connected

with any local church, described his spiritual journey by saying, “I’m searching for biblical answers interpreted the Native way.” Others viewed the local church as not having a place or role for Native men. “They [the local church] don’t see the potential in my husband. There is a disconnect between the white missionary and the broken vessel of the Native believer.”

As demonstrated by the research, faith and spiritual maturity represent a significant part of the picture of Ahtna leadership. Just as clearly, members of the community—particularly the men—struggle to experience growth in this important area of life. However, no one cause or single contributing factor seems to explain the present situation. The answer may well lie in a combination of the elements discovered in the research: (1) the widespread impact of alcohol and substance abuse, (2) the lack of cultural connection to the local church in its present form, (3) a breakdown in the trust between the community and the church, and (4) a feeling that the church has no place for Native men. Therefore, what has provided a foundation for leadership in the past—a vibrant and visible faith—is now sorely lacking within members of the community. This, in turn, contributes to the lack of mentors for an emerging generation. In the following chapter, I offer further conclusions and consider possible solutions regarding this issue.

Analysis and Interpretation of Key Experiences

Beyond individual and group interaction, the research process also included the Origins event, a “key experience” as discussed earlier in Chapter 4 (Stringer 2007, 98). Another potential key experience, the Talking Circle event

did not take place. However even this non-event provided insight into the research process.

The Origins Event

The Origins event held at Strelina Lake Wilderness Camp may be understood from at least three different perspectives: (1) the planning/leadership group, (2) the teen participants, and (3) my role as a researcher-facilitator. Some features of the experience may be found in all three perspectives. Everyone displayed a feeling of accomplishment. For example, rough trail conditions made the hike to the camp extremely challenging; the group had to work together to overcome fatigue and broken gear. Another accomplishment involved catching enough fish to eat for the duration of the camp. This was significant because the group's food planning and preparation counted on this provision. For some of the participants this was their first time to catch fish. They displayed pride in providing for the camp. Following the event, the leadership group talked about an even deeper sense of accomplishment. This was something for which they had worked and planned over the course of several months and now it actually happened. Moreover, they received recognition from the community after the camp. Social media provided a great forum for accolades from a wide variety of people. Referring to the Ahtna young men engaged in leading the event, one long time area resident said, "I don't remember ever seeing mentoring like this happen before. Fantastic!" Everyone felt like something significant had been accomplished.

Another feature of the experience, at least from the leaders' perspective, was a sense that the camp formed part of a much larger process. No one imagined this event to be a magic bullet, something that would instantly solve the issues in people's lives or turn the participants into leaders overnight. Rather, they viewed it as a step on the journey. During the planning meetings for the event, some group members expressed a desire to celebrate the end of Origins with a potlatch, a community-wide gathering, which would celebrate the achievement of all the young men involved. Others disagreed, pointing out that such a celebration would seem too self-promoting when really everyone involved was taking steps on a much longer journey of emerging leadership. In the end, no potlatch or celebration took place. I do not have sufficient cultural insight to judge one way or the other on this issue, but group reflection would seem to indicate that no celebration was the right choice. From their perspective, Origins was one step in a longer process of mentoring potential future leaders.

Following the event, the Origins group gathered to discuss what had happened and evaluate the experience in light of its intended purpose. As mentioned earlier, the group shared a feeling of accomplishment. They also commented on how each individual contributed in some unique way to help make the Origins idea a reality. Further, although before the event they had hoped for a larger number of participants (15-20), after the fact the group agreed that a smaller number gave more opportunity for interaction with the young men. However, the group wrestled with what they felt was a lack of focus while at the same time wanting to maintain the unstructured nature of the experience. No one

wanted to turn Origins into what they considered to be a scheduled Bible camp event with fixed times for activities and teaching. Yet, without some structure, at times the purpose for the trip was lost in the midst of various activities. One group member concluded, “We need to be better prepared as leaders so we know what we want to talk about.”

The schedule and structure dilemma had also raised questions in my mind. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, I found myself struggling with a sense of missed opportunity in terms of teaching and training. Could or should there have been more direct teaching or pointed conversation covering the four leadership themes discussed earlier by the Origins group? In the face of this anxiety, I had to fight my natural instinct to assume control and guide the course of events. This aspect of my experience during the event highlights the importance of understanding the mentoring process from the vantage point of culture. Does the Origins experience offer some important clues about the natural path of Ahtna culture and show us a more indirect way to develop leaders? Would my cultural tendency to engage in more direct teaching or instruction have aided or would it have hindered the overall mentoring process? More research through continued Origins events may answer these questions.

The Talking Circle

The idea for the second key experience in this research project took root during the Community group AR cycle. Various participants expressed a desire to organize a Talking Circle event at a nearby retreat center. This particular Talking

Circle would include input from a community elder. During the interviews and numerous discussions, the Community group followed a track similar to that of the Origins participants in identifying the leadership needs within the community and local church. They also further clarified some of the causes as well as possible solutions. Many elements found in the Origins experience were also present in the Community group, including the emphasis on the importance of cultural identity. In fact, when discussing leadership development, the participants in the Community group gave an even stronger role to the cultural connectedness of the leader. They felt it was vital to include elders in the event in order that they might give teaching in this matter.

The area of greatest difference between the two groups is that the AR process and the progress of the Community group seemed to stall or breakdown before reaching the third cycle of growth. As a result, the Talking Circle event has yet to happen. Rather than following my first inclination and viewing this experience as a failed aspect of the project, I determined to use it as an opportunity for further learning. On the surface, the reason(s) for the extended delay in the Talking Circle appear to be fairly simple: schedule conflicts, difficulty in reserving the retreat location, and transportation issues. Community group members remarked that “Maybe it’s just not the right time” or “I don’t think that will work right now.” Yet, after a period of time lying dormant, the group, along with the idea, would revive and begin to work on a plan of action once again. This cycle repeated itself throughout the research period.

Further reflection revealed three differences that contributed to the distinct outcomes between the Origins group and the Community participants: (1) Anchorage versus the Copper Valley, (2) the personalities of the various participants and their chemistry as a group, and (3) my ongoing physical presence with the Origins group versus a much more sporadic connection with those in the Community group due to the physical distance involved. Clearly, this third issue—my presence in the process—is the one over which I had the most control. Although I worked hard to maintain my role as a facilitator-observer in the research, did my presence somehow lend stability or continuity to the Origins process? I cannot fully answer that question with research data; perhaps there are too many other variables, such as group chemistry, to reach a definitive conclusion. I suspect that, at the very least, this experience with the Community group points to the importance of the ongoing nature of the mentoring process in contrast to more sporadic, event-oriented interaction.

The project findings demonstrate an Ahtna perspective on leadership shaped through the group's culture, the ongoing interaction of the community, the impact of outside events on the context, as well as the importance of character. As I noted earlier, an AR project also focuses on change and growth. In that respect, the Origins event provided a glimpse of the change brought about by the mentoring process. Further change took place in my own understanding of cross-cultural leadership development as well as in the potential for new ministry models. I will describe this in greater detail as well as continue to draw conclusions and discuss implications for ministry in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 6

PROJECT CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter draws conclusions from the research project as well as pointing to implications for ongoing ministry. Often, events or issues carry within them an element for both opportunity and obstacle. I will seek to summarize and evaluate the project findings from this perspective. Furthermore, Stringer uses the term “upstream work” to describe related challenges or circumstances which affect a given issue (Stringer 2007, 150). Two such areas which impact the formation of leadership are highlighted in this chapter. The project conclusions also draw attention to questions and ideas yet to be investigated, and I will discuss some possible next steps stemming from the research. Finally, in light of the participatory nature of AR, my personal growth journey in this project also forms part of this final section.

Conclusions

I have drawn five conclusions from the project findings summarized by the following descriptive themes: (1) a cultural perspective on leadership, (2) the importance of a well-developed cultural identity, (3) enhancing the role of women in leadership, (4) a response to cataclysmic experiences, and (5) the pivotal place

of mentoring in the leadership development process. With each conclusion, I also offer implications for ministry.

A Cultural Perspective on Leadership

The first conclusion from the research may appear beguilingly simple. When considering the idea of leadership development in a given context, a basic step is to first grasp the group's understanding of the concept of leadership. It may be assumed that since the Ahtna reside in the United States and speak English, that whether Native or Caucasian, everyone shares a common vision or idea of leadership. This may or may not be true, but at the very least, this first research conclusion invites a deeper understanding of the concept (and others) within the cultural context. As seen in the project outcomes, the Ahtna describe a good leader to be one who serves the community by helping others, providing for their needs, and giving guidance and answers when necessary. In an example I shared earlier, one participant in the research even suggested that the discussion of leadership development should stop altogether, and instead everyone should work toward character formation. Plueddemann draws attention to the difficulty in defining the concept of leadership by citing questions of culture and translation in global leadership studies (Plueddemann 2009, 94). Throughout the world, people respond differently to questions about leadership based on their understanding of the idea and use of the word. While cultural differences may seem to present an obstacle to the formation of leaders, they also offer the opportunity for the discovery of culturally relevant pathways to leadership growth.

This finding carries implications for Christian ministry. For example, ideas or models of church structure may presuppose a specific leadership style. In the case of SEND North (and other sister organizations), this has often meant that missionaries have sought to establish churches led by an individual pastor working with other lay leaders. Missionaries have been living examples of this model in communities across the North. This project, however, has demonstrated that this individualistic form of church leadership should be thoroughly questioned, if not rejected entirely in some settings where it may be culturally irrelevant. Speaking from an African context, missionary author Glenn Kendall says, “Missionaries trying to pastor new churches run into a host of problems. The church will usually develop along the foreigner’s leadership style...Foreign leadership invariably inhibits the number of new churches because there are only so many missionary pastors to go around” (Kendall 1988, 221). Further study and dialogue is needed to discover a church and leadership model that would follow biblical fundamentals while retaining key cultural patterns of the Ahtna and other peoples of Alaska.

A Well-Developed Cultural Identity

Loss of cultural identity represents a significant obstacle in the leadership development process. Alternatively, it could be said that a well-developed cultural identity serves as a building block for an emerging leader. Whether serving at a community potlatch, drumming at a city homeless shelter, or in the spoken testimony of a tribal leader, the research points to the importance of one’s

understanding of his/her cultural identity. In the words of one participant, “Believing in your culture gives great strength.” Throughout the project, participants consistently used words like “strength,” “meaning,” “inspiration,” and “purpose” when referring to their culture and a connection to it. Conversely, the dominant word for life outside of one’s culture was “loss.” A developing sense of cultural identity gives strength and provides the impetus to pass it on to others. Historically for the Ahtna and other northern people, however, the local church and school have been contexts where they have been forced to step out of their culture and move away from the strength, stability, and identity it provides.

The theological place of culture in one’s own spiritual life, as well as within the church, must be a discussion that is (re)engaged by all those involved in ministry among the Native peoples of Alaska. A conversation I shared with one of the project participants helps to illustrate the issue. He said,

I asked Grandma [the wife of a tribal leader] why our elders didn’t pass down more of our culture to us. She told me that as younger men many of them struggled with alcohol abuse and that they gained freedom from that by turning to God. But then the missionary told them they had to choose between God and our cultural ways like drumming, singing, and dancing because those are from the devil. So, they tried to follow God and the missionary.

As discussed in Chapter 2, while all cultures contain elements that manifest the sinful nature of the human race, cultures across the globe also reflect the image of God. Church function, expressions of worship, leadership style, and patterns of discipleship all must find root and relevance within the local context. In light of this, I suggest that Ahtna Christians be encouraged to pursue their relationship with God in a culturally relevant way. Discovering these contextualized truths

calls for collaborative discussion based on biblical theology, discernment, grace, and trust.

The Role of Women

A third conclusion of the research indicates that the role of women in leadership—whether in community, church, or both—has yet to be fully developed. In the words of one group member, this issue represents a major obstacle to leadership growth. I fully acknowledge that women hold many prominent positions among the Ahtna community. For example, the CEO of the Corporation and the Director of the Ahtna Heritage Foundation are both women. There is a distinction, however, between an organizational title or role and the perception of one's place and standing within the community. One participant described this dichotomy by stating, "Women can be leaders, but only in non-traditional ways." The study did not examine the historical and cultural factors that have contributed to the current perspective on the role of women in community leadership. Nonetheless, while the women participating in the research called for an enhanced leadership role, they also recognized that men needed to rise up to the responsibility of leadership. "Men have been babied and covered up. It's time for them to step up and take responsibility."

What are the implications for Christian ministry in this matter? First, can more be done to teach and demonstrate how to treat women with love and respect? I am concerned that in an area that has experienced over seven decades of Christian outreach there are still such strongly worded negative statements

regarding the treatment of women. What has happened? Why is there a disconnect between biblical teaching and practice? These questions call for further inquiry, but answers should be followed by actions. Second, without engaging in a theological debate on women in leadership, I suggest that no matter where one stands on this issue, any Christian leadership development efforts must include both men and women. The local church could be a model, showing the way to healthy interaction and strong relationships between men and women.

A Response to Cataclysmic Experiences

Cataclysmic experiences can and will completely disrupt life in a given culture or community, and the Ahtna people have experienced several in their history. Earlier I described a cataclysmic experience as “a violent upheaval something beyond the control of a people or group that has tremendous impact on their life and culture.” In Chapter 5, I discussed the construction of the Trans-Alaska pipeline in the 1970s as a local version of a cataclysmic experience. This construction project brought a previously unknown level of wealth to the region, along with a devastating wave of substance abuse and other social and spiritual problems. The Pipeline Generation, as some have called it, were swept under this wave and never fully recovered. Alcohol abuse has cut an even wider, multi-generation swath through the population, leading to a gap in community and church leadership. The Ahtna people are still attempting to recover from the upheaval, which shook the foundation of their culture and existence.

Awareness of such events and experiences is the first step to overcoming their ill effects. I spoke with a veteran missionary who experienced the pipeline years in the Copper Valley, and he said, “We didn’t realize the full picture of what was happening. And even if we had, what could we have done about it?” The heart and purpose of this research is not to criticize or cast a disparaging light on past Christian ministry efforts. Cataclysmic events overwhelm the sense of normalcy; their sweeping impact alters the paradigms of how people believe life should be. Therefore, the first part of the research implication—awareness of the impact of such experience—calls for a vigilant understanding of current trends and influences, along with historical issues that continue to impact a given region or people today.

I would also posit that people can and should act even in the face of sweeping change. This call to respond carries with it an understanding that individuals are interconnected, holistic beings. For example, the process of overcoming alcohol abuse carries physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual implications, all of which factor in to the solution. I believe the Ahtna perspective on leadership—the life influence of one who forms part of the community—mirrors this holistic understanding and also points to the value of the life mentoring process.

Mentoring as a Leadership Formation Process

The importance of mentoring in the leadership formation process is highlighted by the research. This should not come as a surprise as the concept of

mentoring plays a prominent role across leadership development literature and programs, and it is a core concept within Ahtna culture as well. “Learn by watching an older leader,” would be an apt summary of an Ahtna perspective on the matter. The desire to be a part of the mentoring process shaped the heart and purpose of the Origins group, as well as the leadership event they carried out. One of the benefits of mentoring is that it acts as a key ingredient in the sustainability of any leadership formation effort. Stringer discusses the difference between what he terms a bureaucratic program versus a process that displays entrepreneurial characteristics. He urges that the latter not only stays true to AR principles of participation and group ownership, but also avoids the pitfalls of a top down, controlling program that ultimately proves to be unsustainable (Stringer 2007, 147). The Origins event described in this research offers a good example. While it provided an important first step in the leadership formation journey, an ever-present danger exists that it simply becomes another program; an isolated event with one director making decisions for the group. In contrast, the mentoring process by its very nature involves participation, relationships, and mutual engagement in a long-term effort.

A further benefit of mentoring is that it contributes to growth toward what Friedman and others have described as a “well-differentiated leader,” a concept previously discussed in Chapter 3. Steinke’s description of such a leader functioning in a healthy way within his/her community bears repeating:

1. Defining yourself and staying in touch with others.
2. Being responsible for yourself and responsive to others.

3. Maintaining your integrity and well-being without intruding on that of others.
4. Allowing the enhancement of the other's integrity and well-being without feeling abandoned, inferior, or less of a self.
5. Having an "I" and entering a relationship with another "I" without losing your self or diminishing the self of the other. (Steinke 2006, 12)

The research highlighted several links between the Ahtna perspective on leadership and the concept of a self-differentiated leader. First, stories and examples of past leaders demonstrate a balance of individuality and connectedness to the community. The statements describing an Ahtna understanding of leadership often surfaced in the context of a story describing a self-differentiated individual leading through service to others. Research participants also expressed the benefit of gaining an outside perspective while maintaining contact with their people (Chapter 5). Second, in the Ahtna concept of mentoring, although currently at a low ebb as discovered in the project, individuals are encouraged to grow and flourish within the context of the larger group. The Origins experience provided a glimpse of that process in action. Further exploration is needed to fully develop the picture of a self-differentiated Ahtna leader, but the project has uncovered sufficient examples, past and present, to make the pursuit of this leadership characteristic a worthy goal. As a result, I am convinced that the mentoring model, much of which is already embedded in the Ahtna culture, would serve to foster growth toward self-differentiated leadership.

One implication of this finding points to the need for a shift in perspective among those seeking to develop Christian leaders. Here, the words of Dr. Robert

Lee, veteran pastor and missionary and retired Alaska Bible College president are worth repeating, “Most missionaries come prepared *to do* the ministry, but they are not ready *to teach and equip others* to carry out the work” (Robert Lee, August 26, 2013, conversation with author). Speaking from a missionary perspective based on personal experience, this philosophy of ministry—doing the work versus equipping others to do it—is not an easy task. Missionaries typically engage in a ministry with a sense of a call from God and having been sent on mission by churches and donors. Furthermore, they are usually confronted by a picture of nearly overwhelming social and spiritual need, one in which no one seems to be doing anything. Obviously, something must be done and they are the ones trained, prepared, called, and sent to do the job. A common sentiment expressed in ministries across the North is, “I am leading the ministry now because no one else can do it. When local leaders are ready to take my place, I will step down.” That day rarely comes. Changing this scenario will require a significant paradigm shift in the basic missionary model and the exploration of new strategies based upon a more collaborative approach.

Upstream Work

AR author Ernest Stringer uses the term “upstream work” to describe the necessity of addressing the causal factors affecting a given situation or issue (Stringer 2007, 150). The term is a word picture drawn from the analogy of someone rescuing individuals who have fallen into a river. There is nothing wrong with doing the rescue work, but would it not be important to find out why

people keep falling into the river upstream? Can something be done to change that scenario? I will highlight one such issue here: overcoming substance abuse. While not leadership development per se, effort and progress in this area would greatly enhance leadership development among the Ahtna.

Recovery from Substance Abuse

As described in Chapter 5, the devastation wrought upon the Ahtna people by alcohol has been nothing short of catastrophic. Furthermore, it must be noted that this is not a local phenomenon, but rather parallels the experience of all of Alaska's Native peoples. In a recent newspaper article focused on Alaska Native youth and violence, Jill Burke states that alcohol is a factor in 95% of the crimes committed in rural Alaska (Burke 2014). Government agencies and community groups across the state have engaged in a wide variety of preventative and corrective measures, yet they have seen little positive progress. Any effort toward the formation of leaders must effectively address the matter of substance abuse.

I certainly do not purport to have the solution, but I propose that AR could be a tool pointing us to the pathway of change. Often programs or solutions are brought in from outside a community and applied to a given problem. In contrast, AR seeks to discover answers collaboratively. The Origins group provided a small example of this as they grappled with the matter of substance abuse during the leadership event. Their answer reflected a group or community mindset: they maintained a firm No Tolerance stand in terms of alcohol or drugs in the camp. Further, the consequence for breaking this rule would not be imposed on the

offending individual. Rather, the whole group would suffer by terminating the event at that point. The responsibility would lie on the shoulders of the group rather than a leader or governing body. I see the upstream work in this matter to be of absolute critical importance. Moreover, I believe the answer to the alcohol and substance abuse issue will come from within the Ahtna people as they work toward a solution. I fully recognize God's power to change lives, sometimes in a miraculous and almost instantaneous way. I have heard the testimonies and seen the evidence in transformed individuals. However, I also believe that God's power works through His people to explore and implement effective solutions that will lead to a positive impact on an entire community.

The Foundation of Spiritual Identity

A second area of upstream work is the foundation of one's identity in Christ. Previously discussed in Chapter 2, I only reiterate here the importance of this central teaching of Scripture. No matter the cultural context, effective Christian leaders function within the cycle of grace rather than a life based upon performance. The words of Rose Tyone, a godly Ahtna leader, ring true: "If we don't have an idea of what God thinks of us, we will be mixed up in life." Modeling, mentoring, and biblical teaching all serve to develop leaders in this fundamental area.

The answer to how to engage in this area of upstream work may lie in the past. Drawing upon one historical example mentioned in Chapter 1, it would seem that the Native Bible School model used by CAM missionaries decades ago

merits reconsideration. Not only did it include many aspects of mentoring, but it also provided a spiritual foundation which contributed to the emergence of past Ahtna leaders. Low cost and accessible to all community members, the Native Bible School model also offers a platform for emerging leaders to exercise budding teaching gifts within their own cultural context. This type of program would combine well with other mentoring activities described below.

Next Steps

Although this specific project has concluded, I believe there is great potential for further growth in terms of leadership formation, among the Ahtna and beyond. The Origins group continues to gather and has already begun discussing the next event. Not only did they receive positive feedback from the event itself, but the belated response from those who wished they had participated indicated a strong interest in expanding the scope of the event. Likewise, interest in the proposed Talking Circle continues to surface, still awaiting the ongoing presence of someone to act as a catalyst/facilitator. Looking at the bigger picture, events like Origins and a leadership-focused Talking Circle would form part of a larger scale mentoring program. Since the conclusion of this research I have already met with other Alaska Native leaders (not Ahtna) who expressed both the need and desire for local leadership formation. I envision the development of two related “tracks.” One would have a more overtly biblical component and be suited for emerging church leaders, while the other would use biblical principles to

guide the formation of community leaders. The experience and knowledge gained from this project will serve as the launch pad for that effort.

A second area of potential growth stemming from this project is the development of AR as a ministry tool for SEND North (and other) missionaries. While I have experienced firsthand the advantages and benefits of AR as a ministry tool, I understand that the method must be presented in a practical way, easily accessible to others, and with demonstrated effectiveness. Ferris' global leadership development model summarized in Chapter 3 contains core elements of AR, such as the collaborative foundation of the process and the recognition of the role of local context and culture. Furthermore this project demonstrated that the AR process functions as an effective tool in a northern ministry context for several reasons. First, people respond well to the participatory nature of AR as it presents an opportunity to work together in seeking solutions to issues or concerns that affect a group. Second, engaging in AR from a biblical perspective takes control of the process out of the hands of the researcher, and in doing so reminds him/her that God is already at work in that scenario. Finally, the role of researcher/participant positions the individual for personal change and growth, something I experienced as a result of this project.

Personal Journey and Project Summary

My purpose in discussing my personal journey is not to proclaim an achievement, but rather to serve as an example how participatory research can change one's life. As mentioned earlier, relationships lie at the core of this

project. Without hesitation, I can say that I am the beneficiary of rich and growing friendships that were fostered through the time spent in this research. Our relationships should change our lives in some way. One aspect of that change for me came from seeing life at a deeper level through a culture different from my own. Joys, struggles, sorrows, and victories all became shared experiences through time spent in conversation. I trust that the participants in the project have similar feelings through their involvement in the process.

The project also afforded me an opportunity to spend an extended period of time focused on a single concept or area of study. Life and ministry have a way of keeping us in a perpetual state of hurry and distraction. This research process forced me to step away from that normal routine. Although there were moments when it seemed the project would never end, I also gained tremendous value from this extended period of thought on the matter of leadership and its development. If there is a greater life lesson to be learned, it is to exercise the necessary discipline to take the time for deeper investigation and learning in areas of critical importance.

The most significant area of my personal growth relates to trust and control. It may seem odd to hear one who has spent nearly 30 years in Christian ministry speak of learning to be able to trust at a deeper level, but that certainly is one of the results from working on this project. As I ventured into the unknown territory of research of this kind, I experienced my faith in God stretching and growing. I trusted Him to guide my steps toward beginning the program of study. Not only did I learn to trust God in a deeper way, but I was also stretched to trust

others, and to relinquish control of a process in which I had a great deal invested. AR drives the Christian practitioner to a deeper truth: God is already at work in the lives of the people involved. He has been present and active in their context and culture. Recognizing this does not negate my input. Rather, it reorients my perspective to one that is mindful of God's presence. As a facilitator/researcher, I may have introduced ideas and potential pathways to growth, but the more I entrusted the research process to the group, the more I was able to recognize God's hand at work through the variety of individuals participating in the effort.

This personal growth lesson, related to trust and control, provides a backdrop for a summary of the project. First, the Ahtna people already have culturally based perspectives and models of leadership. The question becomes how these pathways can be followed in order to facilitate the emergence of Christian leaders. A much broader application of this principle would be to consider the implications for leadership formation among another people group or even within the various generational groups that form part of the North American church. Second, it is a basic characteristic of all human beings to draw strength and stability from their cultural context. Rather than trying to remove the Ahtna from that which gives them strength, how can church models and expressions of worship be fostered in ways that honor God with the unique qualities which make up this people? Third, a key to sustainable change is the commitment to the leadership mentoring process involving both men and women of all age levels in the church and community. In the words of one Origins participant, "What we're doing is good, but what about the other 360 days in the year?" The answer must

come from the same perspective that guided the AR process for this project: participatory engagement of a group committed to culturally relevant solutions. The same principle holds true for the issue of substance abuse or other cataclysmic forces that threaten the stability of the community. What would a biblically based recovery program rooted in Ahtna culture look like? Much of the expertise, experience, and commitment to change already exists within the Ahtna community.

In the tradition of the rich culture that forms the background of this project, I will conclude with a story. One winter day I found myself cross-country skiing into the Alaskan wilderness. I enjoyed the new terrain as I moved along an unknown trail. As I reached the shores of a lake, I discovered that the wind had blown over the trail, obliterating any tracks or indication of previous travel. Yet, as I looked across the lake, I could see where the trail emerged from the wind-swept lake back into the protection of the forest. Keeping that point in view, I set off across the lake. I found that beneath the blanket of snow, the old trail still existed, providing a firm base for my skis and making it possible to achieve progress. When I would deviate from that foundation, I immediately sank well past my knees in untouched snow, greatly increasing the effort needed and bringing forward motion to a near standstill. The end goal—the emerging trail across the lake—gave me an overall direction, but discernment along with trial and error helped me find the path to reach that goal.

This project has not been about discovering something new nearly as much as it has sought to discern the firm footing of the well-traveled trail—a

pathway toward leadership development already embedded in the Ahtna culture. Traveling this route requires discernment and the grace-fueled courage necessary to engage in trial and error. The benefit in terms of fruitfulness for the Kingdom makes it well worth the effort.

APPENDIX A

ORIGINS GROUP PLANNING NOTES—FINAL VERSION

Leadership Origins

What?

- A program designed to give direction to young men and develop their individual responsibility within the community

Why?

- Positive leadership will impact the community on multiple levels—families, schools, economically, etc.
- Emerging leaders, free from modern distractions, are better able to focus on character development.
- To connect with our cultural background in order to better serve the community together.

How?

- One on one mentoring
- Take a group of young men to a wilderness camp setting, free from outside communication
- Build a sweat lodge as a group
- Engage in activities like canoeing, fishing, survival skills
- Community celebration at the end of week, acknowledging the growth of the participants

When?

- Last week of June

Where?

- Strelna Lake

Planning Ideas

- What's wrong? What needs to be changed?
 - Very few positive role models
 - Alcohol, drugs
 - Previous generation raised with tradition and respect; then the pipeline construction brought quick money, booze, drugs, death
 - Money took over; traditional culture takes patience; money tries to offer a short cut
 - People are disconnected from their roots
 - Searching for meaning

- Culture brings meaning and something to be proud of
 - Alcohol creates apathy
- How will something like Leadership Origins help?
 - Mentors to role model, someone to look up to
 - Ongoing effort after the event is the critical part
 - Build community
 - Can we somehow regain the power of our Ahtna language?
 - Getting closer to God a part of leadership growth
 - Past examples, i.e. Jim McKinley, Harry Johns, Ben Neeley
 - Stories
- Topics/Daily Key Words
 - Inspiration
 - Responsibility
 - Overcoming Failure
 - Purpose
- Bible Story/Devo
 - Inspiration - - David & Goliath—1 Samuel 17
 - Responsibility - - David & Mephibosheth (Saul's son)—2 Samuel 9; Ps. 133:1
 - Failure - - David & Bathsheba—2 Samuel 11
 - Purpose - - David & the Temple—2 Samuel 7
- Daily Agenda - - Flows out of key words
 - Meals
 - Bible Devotional
 - Talking circle
 - Drumming
 - Activities, i.e. survival skills, fishing, canoeing, etc.
 - Free time
 - Project idea(s)—sweathouse, cabin repair, dock repair
- Roles
 - We each have a role to play within the collective group.
 - No one role is more important than the other.
 - Do we need a fifth mentor?—who?
- Initial Materials List
 - Knife, sharpening stone, ax
 - Chainsaw, gas & oil
 - Food
 - Matches
 - Canoes, lifejackets, paddles
 - Survival materials
 - Sleeping bags, mosquito nets
- Safety Concerns
 - Physical safety/first aid
 - People are watching this event—credibility—absolutely must be drug & alcohol free—how to make sure?

- Potlatch Celebration
 - Gifts for participants—custom made chokers—a symbol of achievement
 - Liana/AHF to help?
- Structure
 - What kind of structure do we need to sponsor/promote this event?
 - Form a separate non-profit? Ahtna name?

APPENDIX B

LIFE STORIES

The Spiritual Journey of Traditional Chief Ben Neeley in his own words:

How I Came To Christ

by Ben Neeley

It really thrills my heart to think how I came to Christ. I don't know the day but it was in the year 1945, and I was touched by the Holy Spirit in the village of Gulkana. One time it was a big village across the river but because of sin coming into the village, the village is gone. Our parents used to have good homes but because of drinking the houses rotted or burned and the people lived in tents. Nobody thought about the future or how to know Christ in those days. It was terrible in those days because of sin, people thought only of themselves and just of their trapping and their own lives, and forgot about their homes. Only one house was left because no one had any money to repair or rebuild because of drinking.

I was drinking in 1945 and it was the last summer and the worst summer because I was drinking so heavy. Every time I drank the drinking people would just look at me and sometimes I drank for three or four days and would try to get away to stop and somebody would come along and start me drinking again. One evening I was so sad and lost. I did not know what to do to get away from the drinkers and I could not get myself to do things I wanted because of sins and too much drink. When I was younger I was making money and helped with things

but after I started to drink I could not do what I wanted. Before I bought the things needed, I had to spend it on drink.

That evening I was walking around the village and there was one house left and the people said a missionary is going to have a service there and I didn't think I would go as I wasn't in very good shape and I was afraid to face people. I just walked and I saw people going into the house from everywhere, some white people but mostly native people but I didn't go. I just walked and kept thinking, and thinking, and then my mind started to move around and I thought I should go but I was ashamed to face too many people. Then I thought I would just see what was going on there but I couldn't make up my mind. Finally I felt like somebody was speaking to me forcing me to go and so I went but stayed just by the door.

That time I didn't know anything about the Bible and I didn't read anything in the Scriptures, and I went over just to see what was going on in the church service. I started to go over and I stood by the door and it was crowded with so many people. I couldn't understand what was going on but I knew I wanted to be changed. I felt sorry and I wished I could be a good man and kept thinking but I didn't know what the preacher was preaching about but still I wanted to understand and felt so sorry and wanted to be changed. When the sermon was finished the preacher gave the invitation asking if anyone wanted to receive the Lord right now and no one made a move or said anything. I thank the Lord for the way He spoke to me and I don't know what made me think or move but He spoke to me and that moment I was too nervous to speak, I got short-winded and wondered if I could make it. That preacher said if you didn't want to

come forward to just raise your hand and we will pray for you. It was awfully hard for me to do it but I raised my hand and said I wanted to receive the Lord.

A few days later I picked up the booklet "Pocket Treasury" which was full of Bible verses and I got to thinking about the booklet and put it in my pocket and kept it in my pocket all fall. The first thing I learned was the "Lord's Prayer", Matthew 6:9-12. I memorized it and I thank the Lord for it. I got a Bible and in those days we didn't know about the Bible like we do now. I had a little New Testament book and my Daddy couldn't understand why I had the book. The next thing opened to me was John 14:1-3 where Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." This was open to me and touched my heart. John 14:6--"Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth and the life; no one cometh unto the Father, but by me." And this was opened to me. Then I got scared. I should live for God for He wouldn't have a place for me and if I didn't live for Him I would be left behind. It was a wonderful day for me when I came to know the Lord. Nobody could understand what I was talking about and my Daddy was a strong Russian Orthodox and he got cross at me for reading the Bible. He took the cross every morning before he ate. He believed the Russian Orthodox since his young days and so he thought I was talking about false things. I read to my wife that time and she didn't understand and father-in-law and they couldn't understand what I was

talking about. People said that they thought I stopped drinking because I was afraid of heart trouble.

The Christian life is awfully hard, not like going to school where you can pass from grade to grade. I am thankful to God that He open everything to me right away that I could speak but He gave it to me a little at a time and I didn't know most of the things of God until I became a Christian. When I asked the Lord into my heart I didn't know about the Bible and I thank the Lord after I could testify to the church and I want to thank the Central Alaskan Missions. Rev. Joy came in 1948 at Gakona, one of his helpers, Larry Edwards, there at Gakona, and they showed me how to know the Bible, how to live for the Lord and to love first. "Love one another as I have loved you--the greatest commandment." If we don't love one another, we are not a child of God and if we love others we have Him in our hearts. We have to ask Jesus Christ into your heart. I am thankful I asked Him into my heart.

In John 15:12--"This is my commandment that ye love one another, as I have loved you." And in verse 11 the Scripture says, "These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remind in you, and that your joy might be full." This is true of me today and truly God has said it and I believe it! Since I came to know Him I have joy in my heart and I don't have to worry about things that come in my life. I used to think I was a big man and could handle anybody against me but the Lord has changed my heart and today I can take it and pray for them. My heart is full and I want to thank the Lord at this time for CAM in leading us in the spiritual life.

An Origins Group member life journey in his own words:

I am a constellation, a product of human perception. An average person looks at me and forms his own personal opinion about me, but I am more than meets the eye. Depth perception is not possible when trying to interpret my personality. It takes more than just looking at me with the naked eye, similar to how an astronomer have to look through a telescope to study stars. And even then, the shape you form may be totally different from how another “astronomer” may see me. As a constellation, this is how I see myself.

I was born and raised in the great state of Alaska. I grew up in a rural place called the Copper Basin. Family is one of the most important things in my life. My family consists of multiple subgroups of Alaskan Natives. I am a full-blooded Ahtna Athabascan and I am very proud of it. My mom was a single parent and brought me up to make the best choices, not just for me but for others as well.

Being a full-blooded Alaskan Native does not give you any super talents or anything of the sort. I have no special abilities and I do not excel in art, music, or sports. One thing I do have is motivation, dedication, and inspiration. I do all I can to TRY and excel in things. I love technology, art, music, and history. Traveling the world from New Zealand, to England, to Argentina, and anywhere in between is a goal of mine. I traveled across the United States and plan to see more. Learning is a valuable concept of mine. In between traveling and academics I love to learn about anything. Life is a class, it's a test, and I plan to study hard for it and pass.

Growing up in a rural place in Alaska doesn't give me much to do. So I worked a lot in my teen years. I worked as a Summer Intern for an Alaska Regional Native Corporation called Ahtna, Incorporated. This job consisted of security, receptionist, and maintenance duties. I also worked as a Tour Guide for Ahnta, Inc. as well. Before working for Ahtna, I worked for the Bureau of Land Management as a Fish Counter. Fish Counter is a self-explained job: counting fish. I sat in a tower next to the river and counted fish as they swam by. The job I held the longest is a cashier. I worked as a cashier for more than two years now. Even though the pay was not as good as my previous jobs, it was the most rewarding. I love people and love to interact with them. That job gave me that opportunity and I loved it.

I worked throughout my high school years. High school was a very good experience for me. Coming from a single parent, low budget home helped me grow up fast. I played sports, participated in extra circular activities, worked a part time job, and still held respectable grades in high school. As for Liberty, I continued to play sports at the school league level and was part of many extra activities such as Fan Clubs, Student Leadership, and community service. My grades were above average while I attended Liberty University, but dropped dramatically at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

One of the most influential "steps" in my life has been death. I was exposed to it young, seeing my grandmother pass away. My father passed while I was young from alcohol, my brother Herman as well. Throughout life I did not attend funerals because of the overwhelming sadness from a child, but I would

attend the traditional potlatches. I was numb for the most part from death from early elementary, middle school, and high school, focusing on my mom's immediate family and myself. I had strong bonds with my best friends, but after seeing one of them come close to overdosing in middle school, I started to shield myself to them as well. It wasn't until my nephew passed in 2009 at the age of six that my lack of time with my father's side of the family hit me. I spent time with my nephews and nieces more and made sure to acknowledge my uncles, aunties, and remaining brothers and sisters. July and August from 2010 and on will always weigh on mind. Within three years I lost two sisters, my grandpa Fred Sinyon who was my father figure, and some friends from college. Death is paradoxically the worst and best moments of my life, bringing me to the most depressing times and most wakeful moments. Death scared me into my faith, it caused me to run from my faith, and in the end brought me to the closest connection to my faith in my life.

In the midst of my depression, I had a lot of doubt on my faith, on life in general, and on my purpose in life. While looking for answers by traveling three months, backpacking, taking long bus rides, hitchhiking, making stupid decisions with alcohol and some recreational drugs, and a lot of human connections without judgment, I found joy in life again. My doubt on faith was still there, yet still hanging on for some reason. I came back to Alaska with empty pockets, everything I love in my backpack, but with new perspective that would lead to my most vivid moments of clarity.

I still had a depressed lair in my mind, but I had a spark of ambition to find my purpose again. I stayed with my mom when I first got back, but I ended up packing my bags again and leaving to Anchorage with what I felt I needed and what I could fit in my car. My mom, who I owe all credit to, always understood me. She never held me down, never gave up on me, and always was supportive in whatever I did. I been in Anchorage ever since. I found a family at Great Alaska Pizza Company, met some great, new friends, and a new appreciation for old friendships. My work ethic matured, my humility is still growing, and I found meaning. I'm still searching for purpose, but today, in this moment, I'm happy and at peace. I appreciate all life, every moment I spend with people, and have solace in dark times. I owe it to the people in my life, my upbringing, and where my roots lay.

The Copper Basin is a great, beautiful area to live in. It is filled with the Native culture and wildlife experience. One thing it can do without is alcohol. Growing up in the village can bring negative influences on a person. The Native people, my people, are greatly affected by the outcome of alcohol. I am one of the few to grow up alcohol free and one of the fewer to go to college. I ended my sobriety at the age of 21, but I still feel the negativity of alcohol in my home area. I appreciate a lifted spirit here and there, but I do not enjoy over indulgence. I feel a duty to my people to help grow out of this alcoholic stage, but I don't believe in fighting fire with fire, I believe in finding light in a dark place.

My main goal in life is to please my mom, my family, and my friends. I know that they will support my decision no matter what path I may take. Since I

chose the path of an educator, leaving the path only to find it again, I know I will make them proud. A closer goal in mind would be college. I would like to graduate college, and I have faith and confidence in myself to finish my education. Life is not only a test, it is an ever-changing textbook to learn from, so I'm going to study up.

I love people and I love interacting with people. With my passion for people and my “calling” to help the Athabascan people, I believe that I should become a teacher. A teacher career has always been a possibility for me, ever since high school. Not only does my conscious lead me to a teaching career, but I believe that my personal life, along with work experience, and goals lead me to that direction as well. I am not a group of stars that can be made into a constellation, nor do I believe in horoscopes, but I do believe that something is leading me to teaching. Whatever may be leading me, I believe it's bigger than this universe.

APPENDIX C
RESEARCH ETHICS

Alaska Federation of Natives Guidelines for Research

- Advise Native people who are to be affected by the study of the purpose, goals and timeframe of the research, the data gathering techniques, the positive and negative implications and impacts of the research
- Obtain informed consent of the appropriate governing body.
- Fund the support of a Native Research Committee appointed by the local community to assess and monitor the research project and ensure compliance with the expressed wishes of Native people.
- Protect the sacred knowledge and cultural/intellectual property of Native people.
- Hire and train Native people to assist in the study.
- Use Native languages whenever English is the second language.
- Guarantee confidentiality of surveys and sensitive material.
- Include Native viewpoints in the final study.
- Acknowledge the contributions of Native resource people.
- Inform the Native Research Committee in a summary and in nontechnical language of the major findings of the study.
- Provide copies of the study to the local people.

A Summary of Ethical Research Procedures

Respect for Persons/Concern for Welfare/Justice

Several AFN guidelines speak to this matter: (1) “Include Native viewpoints in the final study.” (2) “Use Native languages whenever English is the second language.” (3) “Acknowledge the contributions of Native resource people.” (4) “Provide copies of the study to the local people.” A Native perspective formed a vital part of the entire project and was included throughout the AR research process. Given that English is the only language fluently spoken by the research participants, it was the appropriate language for all interaction. I have ensured that copies of the study have been made available to all who desire to see it or use its results.

Risk and Benefit

AFN guidelines state, “Advise Native people who are to be affected by the study of the purpose, goals and timeframe of the research, the data gathering techniques, the positive and negative implications and impacts of the research.” Through interaction with the participants, I have made clear the potential benefits of the project, especially in regard to Christian leadership development. Risks associated with this project were minimal. One of the greatest risks related to the research involved the matter of inclusion. To alleviate that potential problem, participation in the research group discussion(s) and events was open to all who wished to attend. In light of the slight risk of competition, rivalry, or the sense that the research will benefit one ministry group over another, I have ensured that all research and information has been openly available to all.

Consent

I have obtained the informed and voluntary consent of all participants in this project. As well, withdrawal procedures have been explained by assuring participants that they may choose to end their involvement in this study at any time without consequence. (See sample form on the following page.)

Confidentiality

AFN calls for researchers to “Guarantee confidentiality of surveys and sensitive material.” The results of all discussions have been kept completely confidential in a secure, locked location and all data has been secured in a password protected format. Any *participant identifying information* has been kept secure and separate from the research data.

CONSENT FORM

I understand that I am being asked by Barry Rempel to participate in an interview related to his Doctor of Ministry research project at Tyndale Seminary.

I understand that the purpose of the data collected is for research to develop a church leadership formation model.

I understand that my participation in this interview and research is completely voluntary and if I wish I may withdraw from this process at any time by notifying Barry Rempel.

I understand that my name will not be used explicitly in any part of this research and all information given will be treated with the utmost confidentiality.

I understand that any documents related to this interview will be stored in a private and safe location.

I understand by completing this interview I am giving my consent to Barry Rempel to use this information as part of his research.

I understand that if I have any further questions related to this interview or the research project I can contact Barry Rempel directly at 907-320-0214 or akbarryrempel@gmail.com.

Disagree

Agree

Name (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date:

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