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## RIDING AN ELEPHANT: REFLECTIONS ON MISSION MOVEMENTS

Riding an elephant is a very exciting experience. It is thrilling to drive a ten-ton animal that has the strength to destroy almost any obstacle in his way. The height of the elephant, almost four meters, gives one a great view of what is nearby and also into the distance toward awaiting situations or dangers. There is a sense of security—even when you are in the middle of the forest—you feel safe on this animal that has no natural predators.

It is easy to think and feel that you have power when you are driving an elephant, but that is not really true. The elephant is taking you wherever he decides to go. You might suggest the direction, try to prod him to move and to stop, but, in the end, the elephant will probably do what he wants to do. It is just a matter of time before you realize that, actually, you are not in control. If you decide to stand in front of the elephant to stop him, then you will truly know who is actually in control.

This is one picture of leading a mission movement. A movement is like an elephant; it is powerful, it is effective, it moves through obstacles, but its movements are probably not the result of anything you are doing. Most of the time, its existence doesn't even depend on what you are doing. When we talk about a mission movement, we have to recognize that it is produced by the direct action of the Holy Spirit.

By the work of the Spirit of God, many mission initiatives are emerging in different parts of the world and in non-traditional places. This is taking place without any centralized direction or action. By definition, a movement is a decentralized action that connects people, organizations, resources and social communities around a unifying purpose that in some way becomes the convener. A movement in essence does not have visible leadership; it has few boundaries and few limitations; it reflects shared vested interests and inclusiveness in its very nature. This is the elephant that people and entities sometimes intend to ride with no success at all because the movement is moving as it is empowered by the action of the Holy Spirit.

Some structures and entities are trying to take advantage of the lack of visible leadership in movements to “organize” or “provide leadership” to those emerging mission movements. But we must recognize that we are just servants of the movement and that, most of the time, it is bigger than we think.

We need mission structures to serve different areas of a mission movement. These structures can sharpen the image of the movement and provide an understandable way to approach it and how to be part of it. Depending on their calling or objectives, these structures must choose the type of organization that better fits with their particular identity.

### Two ways to drive an elephant

Tom Burns and G.M. Stalker defined a distinction between two types of organizations: mechanistic and organic. Mechanistic organizations respond more to the traditional understanding of bureaucracy, with a clear hierarchical chain of commands. Authority flows vertically from the top, and responsibility flows vertically also, but from the bottom. Communication is very rare between people on the top and those on the bottom. Alternatively, Burns and Stalker say,

Organic organizations, by contrast, are characterized by a looser structure in which the overall goals of the organization take precedence over narrowly defined responsibilities. Communication flows and ‘directives’ are more diffuse, moving along many trajectories, not simply the vertical ones.<sup>1</sup>

Organic organizations are usually called networks and mechanistic organizations are called by many names— alliance, coalition, union, federation, confederation, partnership, affiliation, organization or association—depending on how formal their relationships are. Most are defined as: “An official group of people who have joined together for a particular purpose,”<sup>2</sup> and are characterized by a legal type of organization described by Max Weber as having three basic characteristics; impersonal rules, a contract and bureaucratic administrative staff. First, rules constitute an “impersonal

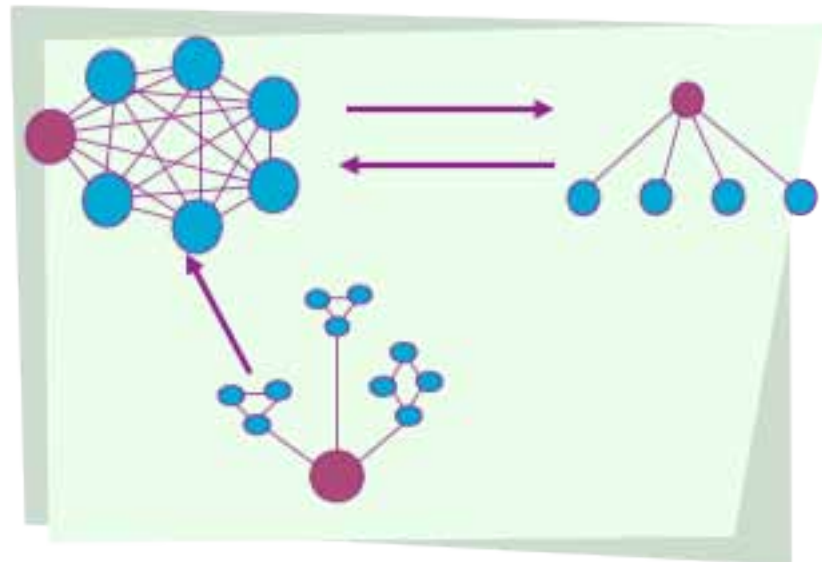
*Footnotes: 1 Giddens, Sociology, 2001: 351-352 2 Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 3 Weber, The Theory of Social and Economic Organization, 1949: 330 4 Giddens, Sociology, 2001: 370 5 Ruiz, A Guide on National Mission Movements, 2000: 35. 6 Ruiz, GCR Antigua ITF Meetings' Manual, 2003 7 Ruiz, a Guide on National Mission Movements, 2000: 16 8 Ruiz, A Guide on National Mission Movements, 2000: 16 9 Ruiz, A Guide on National Mission Movements, 2000: 16 10 GCR, "Definition of GCR", Great Commission Roundtable, 2003 [website] <http://www.icta.net/gcr/html/reference.html> (12 September 2007)*

order” that provide the rational process for officials to make decisions and apply the law while limiting the authority conferred upon them.<sup>3</sup> Second, a contract is needed to define the relation between the person who obeys authority and the system; this is a voluntary decision that indicates the validity of legal ambience by voluntary submission to it. Third, this type of organization needs a bureaucratic administrative staff for its functioning.

A network or organic type of organization, on the other hand, is considered to be a bottom-up decision-making entity.<sup>4</sup> Consensus characterizes its decisions at every level.<sup>5</sup> This particular characteristic provides a constant reminder to members that they are part of a network. A lot of time is invested in working through decisions to address concerns, to solve conflicts and to maintain unity in every action that is taken.

Burns and Stalker present the organic organization as the alternative that is better capable of coping with external pressures and more effective at adapting to take advantage of the changing organizational realities, and in our case, of the mission movements. They also affirm that the impact of bureaucracy transforms organizations into inflexible, legalistic and isolated entities, far from the expected effectiveness remarked by Weber. As the movement grows, simplicity becomes more difficult and networks seem to be the most adaptable organization to ride the elephant.

**The organizational strengths of networking**



The “idea of network” has been developing recently with more elaborate definitions to help its constituency understand how it functions and the role that each element plays with and within the network. We could identify four levels of a network’s development. (See graph.)<sup>6</sup>

*Network* is the first and wider level of relationship, and is defined as “a partnership environment, which allows information flows. This is created when two or more persons meet to voluntarily exchange information and to advance in the development of their job.”<sup>7</sup> It represents the more elementary form of a network that every moment grows from.

*Action network* is the second development of a network. “As people share common interests and areas related with their ministry, a common purpose is identified and an action network is established.”<sup>8</sup>

The *Strategic Alliance* represents the third level of development, and comes into being once “... the purpose that unifies an action network is outlined [and] its members design a specific project to achieve it. This specific project or determined activity is called a strategic alliance.”<sup>9</sup>

Usually the strategic alliance has a temporary existence that ends when the particular purpose is achieved. Finally, a roundtable is a more elaborate level of networking that “convenes leaders of functioning established networks that have a constituency and resources behind them. These leaders are able to influence others with whom they have a defined working relationship.”<sup>10</sup> This level is reserved for resolution of conflict, special projects and strategic meetings to define the future of the movement.

**Warnings for those leading a network:** Leaders of a network must be careful

*Footnotes:* 11 Lipnack and Stamps, *The Age of the Network*, 1994: 89. 12 Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 1947: 339. 13 *Ibid* 14 Considine and Lewis, "Bureaucracy, Network, or Enterprise?", *Public Administration Review*, 63/2, 2003: 134. 15 *Ibid.*, 133 16 Albrow, *Bureaucracy*, 1970: 55 17 Getz, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church*, 1987: 253. 18 Castells, *The Information Age*, 2000, 1, 14.

not to begin establishing the objectives of the network. Instead, they must let objectives emerge from internal sources of the organization. This is a serious challenge because "Purpose plays an absolute critical role in team-nets. It establishes legitimacy, functioning in the place of the hire-fire power of hierarchy and the rules and regulations of bureaucracy."<sup>11</sup>

A problem could occur if the internal members of the network receive assignments from the network leadership instead of convening for the cooperative planning process that is key to the sense of belonging needed for the survival of an entity as a network.

A managerial revolution could also threaten the network because, as Weber said, "Bureaucratic administration means fundamentally the exercise of control on basis of knowledge."<sup>12</sup> Managers, already defined as being in control of the services produced by and for the network, "have the tendency to increase their power still further by their knowledge growing out of experience in the service."<sup>13</sup> With this "power of knowledge" in hands of the managers, leaders of the network could become more and more dependent upon the information and expertise of the managers as well as their assessment in the decision-making process and, especially, in the process of catalyzing the establishment of objectives.

A third bureaucratic challenge that could affect and jeopardize the survival of a network would be if the measure of success is changed from "the creation of a shared organizational culture"<sup>14</sup>

to efficiency as a result of "following of rules and protocols, high reliance on supervision, and an expectation that tasks and decisions will be well scripted..."<sup>15</sup> Merton calls this *bureaucratic ritualism*, and warns "that emphasis on precision and reliability in administration may well have self-defeating consequences. Rules, designed as means to ends, may well become ends in themselves."<sup>16</sup> Getz reminds us that Jesus in the Gospels answered a group of leaders with the following words: "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). In other words, He was saying, 'You have taken a *means* and made it an *end* in itself."<sup>17</sup>

### What is the best way to ride an elephant?

The world continues to change. The "Networking society"<sup>18</sup> is already here, challenging mission structures to become more open, flexible, inclusive and adaptable to the new reality. The Holy Spirit is on the move all over the world, igniting the church with a new missionary fervor and challenging the church to rediscover her missional nature—to stop doing well what He hasn't called her to do and return to the basics—go disciple the nations and recover discipleship as her measure of success.

There is a need for the Mission Movement as part of this scene. It has an instrumental role in creating a place to meet, share and cooperate for those involved in mission. The role of those who are involved in the Mission Movement, as individual or entities, is clear. First, to understand

the mission movement, define it into new categories and compare it with the history of mission. Second, to identify better what is our role and the best contribution we could make to nurture and strengthen the mission movement. Third, to commit themselves to become servants of the mission movement instead of be served by them. Finally, to build the shared organizational culture that is the key for the survival and effectiveness of a Mission Movement ●

GLOBAL DIALOGUE, Responses from leaders of mission movements:

### What brought your national, or regional, mission movement into being?

#### Steve Moore, The Mission Exchange, USA

The National Association of Evangelicals believed in a forum for the mission leaders of member entities to network and collaborate.

#### Reuben Ezemadu, CMF, Nigeria

Following the encouragement of the AD2000 Movement and Beyond, MANI was formed in 2003, in response to the feeling that the Church in Africa was to take primary responsibility for the final gospel thrust in Africa, and that the African Church was uniquely positioned to play a major role in world evangelization in the 21st century.

#### Silas Tostes, Antioch Mission, Brazil

The desire to involve the Brazilian Church in Missions.

#### Decio de Carvalho, COMIBAM, Latin America

A desire to work together to mobilize the church in our area of the world to participate in reaching of the world with the Gospel