

TRANSFORMING WORLDVIEWS

Application of Systems Thinking in Local Missions

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Heibert argues that a mere expression of faith from a convert is not enough to show conversion, because “people often say the same words but mean different things.”¹ Rather, “the gospel is about transformed lives.”² Heibert describes numerous ways people of different cultures understand the world (worldviews). Understanding a group’s stories, norms, rituals, and meeting protocols helps assess the best ways to transform worldviews and “bear witness to Christ.”³

One of the worldview differences Heibert describes is linear causation versus systems causation. Systems analysis has become a “powerful model for studying complex realities,”⁴ whether it is cultural systems in other countries or organizational systems in America. Systems analysis is applied in various church bodies in America and in LCMS Intentional Interim Ministry contexts.

Systems theory offers a concept of interconnectedness which is critical to seeing and addressing the big picture in ministry. In a system, each part must be understood in relation to the other parts.⁵ The idea of interconnectedness promotes efforts to understand and appreciate how one group’s behavior can affect the other(s), for good or bad. This concept is significant for church leaders and members to grasp if they are going to recruit their best thinking and resources to move forward in ministry.

¹ Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2008, 11.

² *Ibid.*, 332.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

Systems analysis can be broken into mechanical and organic approaches.⁶ Marty Kuchma, author of *Church Be Nimble* believes that the mechanical approach has “prevailed in organizations for centuries [and] is now being challenged by another paradigm that views organizations as living systems.”⁷ The mechanical (or machine) model is a closed system, whereas the organic system is a living, self-organizing, system⁸ that invests in educating people and utilizing new theories, methods, and tools in God’s smart world.

In my experience, when churches and schools get stuck, they think of their ministries like machines. One of the problems with a machine is that its parts “inevitably wear out and break down.”⁹ Some church-school ministries believe they can solve problems by taking one person out and inserting a new person, just like an owner would do with a tractor belt or stripped nut. The assumption is that, being like a machine, the problem is fixed by removing the defective part and operations should resume like before.

Heibert’s overt goal to change people of different cultures “at all levels of their culture, including their worldviews”¹⁰ could meet with the same criticism that missionary efforts in the wake of the Enlightenment met with: that there was little distinction between the superiority of Western cultures and Christianity and Western culture was imposed on native peoples.¹¹ But a goal to change worldviews in local American ministries, like with an application of systems theory, would rarely come under the same criticism. In fact, some culture changes may be perceived as fostering healthier relationships and greater efficiency.

⁶ Ibid., 77.

⁷ Marty Kuchma, *Church Be Nimble: Organizational Dynamics and Creativity in Mainline Congregations*, Church Be Nimble Publications, 2014, 45.

⁸ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 77-80.

⁹ Kuchma, *Church Be Nimble*, 28.

¹⁰ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 332.

¹¹ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991, 298.

References

1. Bosch, David. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991.
2. Hiebert, Paul. *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2008.
3. Kuchma, Marty. *Church Be Nimble: Organizational Dynamics and Creativity in Mainline Congregations*, Church Be Nimble Publications, 2014.