RESOURCE O
Network Theory and Churches[1]

BASIC CONCEPTS

1. Network-based, nonhierarchical leadership

Healthy organizations are "flattening" the org chart to encourage teamwork, free-flowing relationships, and individual creativity. Even traditionally pyramidal organizations like the military and corporations find that teams perform well when allowed freedom in decision making and responding to changed circumstances.

This new behavior requires new attitudes toward power, control, and accountability, as well as heightened trust in people to function responsibly outside command-and-control structures.

Basic principles (as outlined by Fred Burnham, of the Institute for Servant Leadership, in his paper "Network Theory & Church Leadership"):

A healthy church needs to show **"environmental sensitivity,"** that is, an ability to identify contextual changes promptly and to respond to them. A hierarchical or bureaucratic structure discourages such sensitivity by its tendency to assign blame, rather than learn from the unexpected; by self-protective behavior at every level; and by slowness of response. Teams and individuals "close to the ground" see more and respond better.

A healthy church avoids "centralized control," because centralized control slows communication, discourages the taking of initiative, and hampers healthy relationships. Instead, the healthy church encourages an **open system,** in which information and ideas flow freely and rapidly and people organize themselves to deal with needs.

A healthy church values "individual agency," that is, individuals functioning beyond rules and boundaries to do what they do well.

A healthy church encourages **"self-organization,"** in which "enterprising individuals begin to select gifted teammates to work with them," Burnham writes.

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1. This section was originally published in Tom Ehrich, *Church Wellness: A Best Practices Guide to Nurturing Healthy Congregations* (New York: Church Publishing, 2008), 43-46. Used by permission.

Open and transparent communication, which Burnham calls "Scale-Free Communication," generates more and better information, enables the network to adapt effectively, and avoids secrets or "in-crowd" knowledge.

Even though homogeneity might feel more comfortable, **"Diversity"** yields richer information and problem-solving. Leadership circles must mirror the diversity of the larger congregation.

A healthy church values **"Innovation and Adaptation,"** as opposed to resisting change.

2. Leaders understand and value network-based leadership

As they envision and carry out their work in church, effective leaders will resist the tendency to emulate hierarchies they know at work or prior church experience. Instead, starting with the leadership cadre itself, they will model open, free-flowing, decentralized, and spontaneous functioning.

A critical starting point will be transparency and abundant information. Leaders will tell others what they are doing, will share information widely, even negative news, and will encourage feedback.

Leaders will listen to groups and individuals, rather than tell them what to do. Leaders will identify problems rather than compel specific solutions.

Leaders will maintain appropriate boundaries and not fill every vacuum.

Leaders will self-regulate to discourage "takecharge" behavior, whether born of frustration or enthusiasm or a need for control.

3. Leaders see their roles as network-support, not running things

Jesus formed circles of friends, not a hierarchical institution concerned with allocating power.

Jesus saw leaders as servants, nurturing those circles, not as managers running an institution.

Whether circles form intentionally or spontaneously, they benefit from an environment of freedom and healthy norms. Leaders establish and protect that environment and affirm healthy norms. For example:

- Networks depend on effective tools of communications, not facilities. Leaders will affirm a norm of open flows of information, and will provide open access to communication tools.

- To promote diversity and self-organization, leaders will establish a norm of inclusiveness and will monitor networks for signs of closed doors.

- Leaders will monitor formation of groups and, if necessary, will assist in their formation, so that members unaccustomed to network-based participation can earn to trust it and function effectively in it.