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# Ambidextrous Leadership

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Ruben Duran

*Senior Director for Multi-Ethnic Ministries and Leadership, ELCA*

No one culture can claim the monopoly of God's revelation. The theological insights and life experience of people in one culture can affirm, challenge, and expand the theological insights and perceptions of that of another culture. Therefore, we need each other.

As the people of God come from diverse places and cultures to live and be involved in ministry in the North American context, the opportunity for ongoing dialogue and mutual learning is right before us. Together, in community, we can turn vertical walls that divide us into horizontal tables that unite us, bringing people together to share wisdom and engage in doing theology in this constantly and rapidly changing context.

Over the last forty-three years I have had the opportunity to serve the church in a variety of roles: Youth Director, Pastor, Synod Staff, Churchwide Mission Strategist, Coach and Instructor at various seminaries. In all these roles, I have benefitted from the ongoing dialogue and mutual learning together with leaders of many cultures and backgrounds. Among them there are two special colleagues that I want to point out to you, Dr. José David Rodríguez Jr., and Dr. Jay Alanis. These two amazing leaders have deeply impacted my life and ministry. Even though I was not in a seminary class led by them, I have been an ardent student of their theological teaching and practical ministry in church and in society. I call them ambidextrous leaders.

An ambidextrous person is a person who can use their right and left hands with equal accuracy. Very few people can use both hands with equal skill, as low as 1% of the population. Are you one of those few? Want to try it?

On a piece of paper use one hand to print your name and then sign it as if you are signing a check. Then try to do the same with the other hand. Now one more try, use each hand to draw the front entrance of your church. What did you notice? Are you ambidextrous? I am not one of those few, and as far as I know, neither are Dr. José nor Dr. Jay.

I am calling them ambidextrous for another reason. It has to do with the way they embody their understanding of God's action in the world. Year after year I have had the privilege of observing how they practice their deep seeded notion that God works in two

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ways to carry out God's mission on earth. Dr. Craig Nesson calls them "two strategies,"<sup>1</sup> two types of divine activity to oppose the forces of evil and move to bring forth God's Kingdom among us. Dr. Nesson reminds us of Martin Luther's key teaching called The Two Kingdom Theory. Luther taught that God uses two hands in opposing the forces of evil and crafting initiatives that reflect the real presence of God's Kingdom in our midst. God uses a right hand to work in and through the church and God uses a left hand to work in and through civil society. These are ways of working, two strategies, two hands that work with equal accuracy and skill. "God is ambidextrous," says Dr. Nesson, "and very coordinated in the use of both hands to save and preserve the world."<sup>2</sup>

If God is ambidextrous, then we have received the capacity to be ambidextrous as well. In Holy Baptism we are welcomed into God's family, given a new identity as children of God and called to be collaborators in God's activity in church and world. Our actual hands might not be equal in skill and not well coordinated, but, as people of God, we are invited to participate in the work of the two hands of God in the world.

I believe this insight is the most impactful dynamic I have received from the life and witness of these two ambidextrous colleagues and friends, Dr. José David Rodríguez and Dr. Jay Alanis.

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1. Craig Nesson, "Reappropriating Luther's Two Kingdoms," *Lutheran Quarterly*, Volume XIX, (2005), 304.  
2. Nesson, "Reappropriating Luther's Two Kingdoms," 306.

They have been and continue to be active participants in dialogue and mutual learning with students and leaders of many cultures, seeking to maximize their knowledge and giftedness to propel God's mission in whatever context students and other leaders are sent to serve. And in addition to this, I believe they are humble examples of Christian leadership responding to the call of an ambidextrous God.

I met Dr. José in 1988, when my wife, Jean, and I moved to Chicago. I accepted a call to serve as Assistant to the Bishop in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod, alongside Bishop Sherman Hicks. Jean enrolled at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) continuing her studies toward ordained ministry started at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California. Jean enjoyed classes and interactions with Dr. José very much, especially his active listening and open questions to expand horizons. It did not take long to meet him as I visited his parish, Iglesia Luterana de la Trinidad in the Humbolt Park neighborhood. He was an active member and frequent preacher there. It was a great joy to work on revitalizing the congregation and strategizing for its future. The church had an aging building right across from the Norwegian American Hospital. In dialogue with leaders at the hospital we found out that they needed parking for their growing number of patients and the church needed a newer building and/or a new location. Together we worked out a deal. The hospital would take over the old church building and turn it into a parking lot, and Dr. José's church would get the deed of land property to build a new sanctuary on Division Street, right across from the park. The hospital also committed funds for the ceiling once the building was erected. The right and left hands of God were at work here.

I also witnessed Dr. José's involvement in the public, in the wider community, among nonprofit and community-based organizations. I remember his invitation to join in, representing the Synod, in community gatherings organizing for the wellbeing of residents, safe neighborhoods, better support for schools, affordable housing, and ensuring the presence and voice of the community keeping civic institutions accountable. I recall his encouragement to local leaders to run for local offices available. Leaders like Billy Ocasio and Luis Gutierrez emerged and represented the community for many years, in key places like the Chicago City Council and at the U.S. House of Representatives. The left hand of God was at work.

Dr. José's influence in the life of the church included his commitment to work ecumenically and globally which is demonstrated in his book *Teología En Conjunto*, convening diverse viewpoints from leaders in several countries and cultures. And this commitment was also evident in his beloved Puerto Rico, connected with several denominations at the Seminario Evangelico de Puerto Rico. It was a great honor for Jean and me to accompany him and his family at the funeral for his father, Dr. José David Rodríguez Sr. Dr. José's father and my father, Pr. Florencio Duran, had become friends in Chicago when my parents came to help us during Jean's year of internship in Berwyn, Illinois. Dr. José's dad and mine spent hours sharing notes and reflections from decades of pastoral

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ministry in church and in society in Peru and in Puerto Rico. All they needed was good coffee and Peruvian food to get them going, and language was not a problem.

Dr. Jay and I met when he became a PhD student at LSTC. I had heard of him before through the Hispanic Lutheran networks, about his various studies, especially becoming a Doctor in Jurisprudence at the University of Texas School of Law. Through my work I had the opportunity to visit the place he was born, San Juan, Texas, and the church he belonged to, St. John Lutheran, both near the border with the United States of Mexico.

What a delight to get to know him better and envision together things that can be done to better equip leaders for church and society. Dr. Jay is a wise, humble, and courageous leader, passionate about sharing the liberating gospel of grace in Jesus Christ and God's work for justice and equity for all people. He was very aware that the oppressive systems with a colonizing mentality in places such as the southern border had produced deep wounds in the lives of people, especially the common experience of internalized oppression, a yearning for human dignity and a crisis of identity.

Dr. Jay's PhD thesis confronted these issues head on. He resisted giving in to the status quo created by systems catering to the interest of a privileged few and to the detriment of many. His theological and pastoral work on the place and the power of the sacrament of Holy Baptism in the lives of people and communities is liberating. The new identity given to all the baptized, children of God, becomes an equalizer of all people, equipping all to stand on equal level before God and one another. Therefore, the gift of Baptism is the basis for creating inclusive communities where all people are endowed with human dignity, respected for who they are, and empowered to love their neighbors near and far. I learned from him that God's gift of baptism is the antidote to racism, prejudice, homophobia and any other evil force that denigrates our God-given identity.

One of the most beautiful pictures I have of Dr. Jay is not one taken by a camera, but a picture taken with my eyes and heart.

During Dr. Jay's years at LSTC, one of my sisters, Ruth Duran, was also studying to become an Associate in Ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. My mother, Alejandrina, had come to accompany her due to an unexpected illness. Ruth became known as a prayer warrior in school. She invited students to come to her apartment to visit and pray for each other, the church, and the world. Sometimes few people would come and sometimes the room was full. Very soon Ruth noticed that when my mother had Peruvian food ready, the room filled up for prayer. Sometimes Dr. Jay showed up with the larger groups, but mostly he had special timing given for him to come, enjoy good food, visit, and pray. One day I came to see Ruth and my mother unexpectedly and found them praying and blessing each other by laying on of hands. That picture is still in my heart and memory. Ruth always said to me she had found another good brother. Dr. Jay told me several times he had found a new family. Ever since then I have never hesitated to call him my brother.

One of the finest contributions Dr. Jay has made to the church is the impact of his teaching in the formation of new pastors, deacons and lay leaders serving all over the world. He served as the Director of the Lutheran Seminary Program of the Southwest, in Austin, Texas, at that time a joint ministry of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. I had the opportunity to serve for several years as instructor along with him, training diverse leaders in the church who were seeking to grow in competency in serving Latiné neighbors in their context. He convened this table of dialogue and mutual learning, preparing many for ministry in and through the church and in and through civil society. At every opportunity both then and now, Dr. Jay has intentionally invited leaders to visit, listen, and learn from people living and those in transition at the border between the United States of America and the United States of Mexico. He brings people together to listen and learn from leaders of legal networks, with those in public service, those in nonprofits and those advocating for migrant ministries within the church.

Thank God for these ambidextrous leaders: Dr. José connecting God's action in seminary, church, and neighborhood, and Dr. Jay connecting God's action in seminary, church, and border. Both hands of God at work in real life, among real people, bringing in God's Kingdom.

The impact of these two leaders in my life and ministry happened over the years while serving on Synod staff and later as Churchwide staff. As I visited churches all over the country, I noticed a growing disconnect between people inside the church and the people outside in the community. Most people in the church told me that their primary circle of friends were other church members. Therefore, they were willing to commute large distances to see their friends every week. What happened in church during the week would be the pastor's responsibility. It is no surprise to experience a rapid decline in church attendance and participation these days.

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way, and leadership has been highly professionalized. In many ways these dynamics describe a church paralyzed. What if faith can be experienced and lived out both as a private matter and through active participation and witnessing in the public arena? What if ministry becomes more organic, using all the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives so that the Body of Christ can be healthy and grow? What if leadership can be both professional and vocational, releasing the baptized to live out their faith every day, through the many hats they wear at home, at work, in their circles of influence, in church, in civic life? My question is, why are so many churches and people living out their Christian identity utilizing only one of God's hands? In doing so, we are limiting the impact God's action can have in caring for all people's groups and creation.

Ambidextrous leaders can help create ambidextrous churches. Ambidextrous churches can be described as communities of faith who learn how to participate in the two strategies of God to save and preserve the world. Some leaders will exercise their giftedness supporting the divine activity of God in and through the church, while others will focus their talents in participating in the action of God in and through civic society. God's Spirit will keep both hands working in a coordinated way. The Spirit will activate people to engage others to restore a sense of community that invites others to experience God's unconditional grace, radical love, and true justice.

In preparing and supporting leaders who are forming communities of faith in diverse contexts I have learned the importance of four elements that need to be given priority. One is the articulation of a biblical and theological identity for this church. Second is the creation of strategies for the development of leaders within the church community. Third is the art of caring for the organic life of the church, so that all parts of the body working together propel bodily growth. And fourth, the ongoing reading and learning from the changing community around the church. Being in relationship with people, organizations, networks, and institutions in the larger community increases the church's capacity

to accompany civil society. It also enhances the view to the divine activity of God there. In a sense, we all are called to be detectives of divinity in church and in the public arena.

Identifying and participating in the two strategies of God to save and preserve all of creation is a critical skill and a high priority for all of us. We know that we can love God in and through the neighbor. But how can we love our neighbor if we do not even know who they are and where they are? Are we expecting them to find us and work their way into fellowship? I hope not. We are called to step out of our comfort zones and seek to build relationships in the community around us. We can get out there, feeling at home in our theological skin in both church and society. Our neighbors have agency, they hold important clues that can assist us in designing initiatives to be in relationship with other neighbors, new and old and work for their wellbeing. There are many people actively serving in civic society who do not know they are doing God's work. What an opportunity to engage in dialogue and mutual learning!

Through the ministry of Jeremiah, a prophet, God gave God's people what I call a missional principle. In Jeremiah 29:7 we read: "Seek the wellbeing of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its wellbeing you will find your wellbeing." I am often asked how to get started on this. In my response, I try to invite people to practice their ambidextrous skills, exercising more curiosity than judgment. I suggest leaders try these strategies in their communities as detectives of divinity:

1. The helicopter view, learning from current and projected demographic information
2. The street view, learning from diverse people on the ground
3. The asset view, mapping out the gifts in action and potential partners in the community
4. The power view, analyzing decision-making processes and systems in church and society
5. The impact view, connecting with collaborating and collective alliances at work.

I have learned that the vitality of a church and its capacity to grow is greatly enhanced by its relationship, on-going connection, and network of partnerships in the community the church is called to serve. Through these relationships we will be able to listen, learn, understand, accompany, serve, and when the opportunity

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arises, witness to the hope that is within us, that God's Kingdom is here, in Jesus' real presence, inviting all to experience, with him, a community of grace, hope, love, and justice.

I asked you earlier to try to write and draw with your right and left hands. You probably noticed the difference in skill and accuracy. Now try to draw a heart with each hand. I am sure you noticed your accuracy increasing. A sign of love can be generated equally with either hand. So, it is with the hands of God, they both aim at proclaiming the passionate love of God for all of creation, so much so that God became one of us in Christ our Lord to reconcile all things back to our God.

I continue to appreciate the impact Dr. José and Dr. Jay have had in my life and ministry. These two ambidextrous leaders, in their own unique ways, gave me insights into the formation of ambidextrous churches, the ones that learn how to participate in the two strategies of our ambidextrous God bringing the Kingdom into our fallen humanity. Thanks be to God.