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HOW THE CHRIST HYMN IN PHILIPPIANS 2:5–11 INFORMS THE PRAXIS OF  
LEADERSHIP IN AT-RISK COMMUNITIES: TWO SUPER-LEADERS  
OPERATIONALIZING KENOSIS.

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The concept of kenosis is explored in the Christ Hymn of Philippians 2:5–11 from a praxis viewpoint as opposed to a purely theological exegesis. How does this idea of “self-emptying” or “radical subordination” translate into leadership? This paper shows how two super-leaders, leaders who train leaders, Dr. Y.C. James Yen and Myles Horton, embodied the idea of kenosis in the way they practiced leadership in at-risk communities and how this practice was essential in altering the sense of self-efficacy and perceptions of personal identity for the impoverished. It reveals kenosis in the practice of leadership to be transformational.

*Keywords:* kenosis, at-risk communities, poverty, Horton, Yen, community development, impoverished communities, leadership, radical subordination, transformational leadership, super-leader.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The Christological hymn in Philippians 2:5–11 is part of a letter sent by the Apostle Paul to the church at Philippi. The church was experiencing inner conflict that hindered the spread of the gospel, while they were at the same time facing opposition externally (Philippians 1:29,30). The letter was written during the reign of Emperor Nero who sought to be worshipped as a living god, placing Roman imperial ideology in direct conflict to the Christian teaching of Christ as Lord and his reign on earth (Oakes, 2005).

The emperor cult saturated Roman culture and the people at Philippi, many of whom were retired Roman soldiers who had considerable pride and devotion to the cult and to Roman law and culture which emphasized ambition, status, and wealth (Franz, 2004). The church in Philippi also struggled with an obsession with social status, pride and upward mobility (Hardgrove, 2008). Paul heard of their struggle and addressed it in Philippians 1:15–17 (New International Version):

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.

This cultural fascination with the image of the emperor, who through pride and arrogance elevated himself to the stature of a god, coupled with the pride of the citizenry in their Roman heritage, served as a backdrop to Paul's letter to the Philippians. In dealing with this internal conflict of the church (Philippians 4:2), and the growing adoption of the values and attitudes of the culture around them, Paul composes the Christ hymn in Philippians 2:5–11. It presents Christ in stark contrast to Emperor Nero, without directly naming him. In doing so, Paul challenges members of the church at Philippi to imitate Christ not only in action but thought.

The Christ hymn provides both a powerful insight into the character and nature of God and a counter model for how a true leader behaves. The hymn's emphasis on humility and its direct reference to Christ being a servant reiterates the model Jesus provided when he washed the disciples' feet. By that act of servanthood, he declared his perspective on leadership, and how leaders should view themselves (John 13:1–17). Hardgrove views the Christ hymn as a song for leaders (Hardgrove, 2008).

The Christ hymn has had significant study over the centuries. Topics arising from the text include: (a) whether or not the passage constitutes a hymn or is merely illustrative language by the author, (b) whether or not the portion clearly delineates the truth that Jesus represented the fullness of God or was fully God, (c) whether or not Jesus completely emptied himself of all aspects of deity or merely subjugated his divine characteristics (kenosis), and (d) whether or not Jesus became fully human, to name but a few key theological areas (Athanasius, 350?; Decker, 2003; Howard, 1978; Portier, 1994; Rosok, 2017; Wuest, 1958).

This paper focuses on the concept of kenosis associated with verse seven in the text which states, "rather, he made himself nothing (ekenōsen) by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Philippians 2:5–7). One definition of ekenōsen is, "to empty, to make empty, to make vain or void" (Barnes, 1997).

This paper will examine kenosis from a praxis orientation, following the accepted interpretation of Vincent regarding kenosis being a form of self-subjugation or subordination.

The general sense is that He divested Himself of that peculiar mode of existence which was proper and peculiar to Him as one with God. He laid aside the form of God. In so doing, He did not divest Himself of His divine nature. The change was a change of state: the form of a servant for the form of God. His personality continued the same. His self-emptying was not self-extinction, nor was the divine Being changed into a mere man. In His humanity He retained the consciousness of deity, and in His incarnate state carried out the mind which animated Him before His incarnation. He was not unable to assert equality with God. He was able not to assert it. (1985)

This emphasis is on kenosis as self-limitation and has strong support (Cronin, 1992; Gray, 2008; Langmead, 2004; Wuest, 1958). Chafer points out that due to the immutability of the attributes of God, Jesus is unable to divest himself of his full deity (Chafer, 1947). Chafer states it is a subordination of his divinity to his humanity, a restricting of his divine nature to his human consciousness and to the will of the Father. First, he gave up independent exercise of divine power. Now, as human, he must act when his Father permits it. Second, he is no longer in control of all of history. He who was infinite became finite even to the point of experiencing death (Chafer, 1947). Yoder explains it as the renouncing of the claim to govern history, his providential control of events and free exercise of his powers. He now is subject to the whim of time and circumstance (Yoder, 1994).

Yoder, in examining what could be gleaned regarding how Jesus functioned in the application of politics, used the term *radical subordination* to explain the concept of kenosis. He refers to Jesus intentionally holding back on his display of deity (1994). Using Yoder's approach, this paper examines how leaders who work in at-risk communities practice kenosis, or radical subordination, to be effective in empowering the poor to rise from poverty by holding back the leader's use of power, knowledge, expertise or resource availability in order for the impoverished to develop their abilities and recognize their local assets.

Examples are provided of two leaders in at-risk communities who utilized this concept and its impact on members of at-risk communities they served. These leaders practiced kenosis during two different time periods on two separate continents and with vastly differing populations in at-risk communities. The paper also explores the impact of this practice on those within at-risk communities.

### *At-risk community definition*

There are numerous definitions for at-risk communities anchored in various contexts. Some define these communities as those that experience addictions of various types, domestic violence, homelessness, civil war, or terrorism, etc. (Carter, 2011; Glasmeier & Farrigan, 2003; Lange, 2008; Pinedo, 2014). In this paper the primary focus is upon those within impoverished communities and the pathologies arising from chronic poverty.

The first leader this paper will consider is James Yen, who worked initially in China. At the time of his work the United Nations did not exist. However, the United

Nation's definition of poverty grasps essential elements found in at-risk communities and would be applicable in the environment and context of Yen's activity.

Fundamentally, poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society. It means not having enough to feed and clothe a family, not having a school or clinic to go to, not having the land on which to grow one's food or a job to earn one's living, not having access to credit. It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities. It means susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living on marginal or fragile environments, without access to clean water or sanitation. (1998)

The problems outlined for at-risk communities often exist in greater concentration and impact in these settings while showing unique cultural expressions arising from differing worldviews (Myers, 1999). These people often live in countries struggling to develop economically and politically. Expansion of the global economy catapults multinational corporations into these areas and confronts them, along with the governments involved, with new problems. More positional leaders are recognizing that a key question is, who provides leadership within these at-risk communities and people groups and how should it be developed and expressed (Dollar & Kraay, 2000; Greider, 1997, 2003; Held & McGrew, 2000; Post, 2003; Ratner, 2001; Sachs, 2005; Schneider, 2002; Stiglitz, 2003; Tomlinson, 2000; Woods, 2000; Young, 2003)?

The second leader, Myles Horton, worked in the context of the Appalachian region in the United States. The Appalachian Regional Commission states (2005):

A distressed or at-risk community (county) in the United States is classified as distressed if its poverty rate is 200 percent of the U.S. average and has either an unemployment rate of 150 percent or more of the U.S. average or an income level of 67 percent or less of the U.S. average.

At-risk communities, whether viewed within the United States or internationally, tend to experience similar pathologies such as high crime rates, high rates of substance abuse, high rates of single parent households, low education levels due to poor schools, an absence of positive role models for youth, political corruption, high rates of disability for those of an employable age, high rates of domestic violence, absence of control over resources, poor health and health care, and racism or other "-isms" that demean the human spirit. At-risk communities embody the most damaging aspects of poverty such as poverty of motivation or initiative, poverty of morality, poverty of hope, poverty of opportunity, poverty of role models, poverty of wisdom, poverty of resources, poverty of influence, and poverty of spirit. The harsh realities of this environment can breed frustration, apathy, and anger which fester under the surface, ready to explode at the slightest provocation (Borooah, 2005; Collier, 2007; Deshpanda, 2001; Glasmeier & Farrigan, 2003; Lewis, 1968).

### *How identity is shaped by contextual realities in at-risk communities*

Perceptions of identity for those living in impoverished communities are shaped by the environment or context, as Coles examined in his series on the moral life of children in crisis (1987). Gaventa also explored how powerlessness negatively shapes the identity of people in impoverished communities in Appalachia to the point of framing for them what is proper for them to expect in terms of life possibilities and even

individual dreams of the future (1982). Members of these communities tend to have feelings of helplessness, victimization, weak ego structure, low impulse control, fatalism, a present orientation with little ability to defer gratification, lowered aspirations, strong feelings of powerlessness, and a lowered sense of self-efficacy (Bachrach & Baratz, 1972; Bandura, 1995; Christian, 1994; Ergood & Kuhre, 1991; Gaventa, 1982; Jarrett, 1995; Latz, 1989; Lavelle & Staff of Blackside, 1995; Lewis, 1968; Lukes, 1974; MacLeod, 1987; Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1994; Tribune, 1986). Researchers point out that it is essential for the poor to undergo a transformation in their perception of their identity that enables them to shape their own destinies, overcome shame and a sense of despair, and regain the power that is rightfully theirs (Borda, 1985; Freire, 1990, 1995; Gaventa, 1982; Lukes, 1974; Perkins, 1995; Suarez, 2000).

The combination of volatile social relationships and stressful environment creates high levels of internal stress that often serves to diminish motivation, lead to self-destructive coping mechanisms, malaise, and lack of trust (Gaventa, 1982; Gillock & Reyes, 1999; May, 1972; Mitchell, 2003; Warren, 1998). In a study of native Americans it was discovered that the distressed environment led to a struggle with ethnic identity which led to more intense positive and negative emotional experiences leading to depression, anxiety, lowered self-esteem and a higher level of conformist behavior (Newman, 2005).

Historically, at-risk or distressed communities have had programs imposed on them from outside entities (Borda, 1985; Borda & Rahman, 1990; Freire, 1990; Gaventa, 1982; Horton & Freire, 1990; Mayfield, 1986; Perkins, 1976). As a result, residents of these communities have been disillusioned with not only expert leadership, which often gallops in to save them with the latest idea or program, but with the political process in general. The very people who gain the most when the poor accept the status quo, often control the political system. Consequently, the poor are suspicious of traditional leadership styles based upon command and control approaches and tend to be passive when new programs are forced upon them. Over time, this trend toward inactivity can grow into a sense of helplessness and powerlessness that threatens the very fabric of the community by making its members dependent on outside leaders (Bandura, 1995; Freire, 1990; McKnight, 1995; Perkins, 1982; Peterson et al., 1994).

How does one practice leadership within at-risk settings, with impoverished or disadvantaged people, in a manner that not only preserves but develops their sense of self-worth, dignity, and self-efficacy and places them in the position of leadership rather than subservience?

## II. THE PRAXIS OF KENOSIS: TWO SUPER-LEADERS IN TWO DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

What are super-leaders? A super-leader “inspires followers to develop their own leadership capacities and then to use these to effectively lead themselves by setting their own goals and solving their own problems while maintaining a positive and optimistic outlook” (Pearce, 2003). This paper looks at James Yen and Myles Horton, two super-leaders.

*James Yen and the International Institute for Rural Reconstruction*

James Yen was born in 1893 in Szechuan, China, into a venerated, scholarly family. He had an early education in the Chinese classics. At the age of 11 he entered a boarding school run by the Christian mission organization, China Inland Mission. He progressed and eventually earned a degree from Yale University in 1918. Yen was recruited by the YMCA to oversee Chinese workers who labored for the allies in WWI digging trenches and doing construction work (Mayfield, 1986). While working with these coolies (which means “bitter strength” in Chinese), he began to help them by writing letters for them to send home since they were illiterate. He felt so humbled by their hard work and dedication that he began to ponder how he could help them learn to read. The Chinese written language is complex, consisting of over 40,000 characters, and so difficult to master that some top scholars had never completed the task. Yen, after analyzing scores of letters he had written for these laborers, realized that it would be possible to reduce the number of characters to be learned to approximately 1000. He created a text book and began teaching 40 volunteers one hour each night. Within four months, 35 had completed the course and had written their own letters home to their families. In order for the pupils to practice their new skill, he created a newspaper using the 1000 characters, *The Chinese Laborer's Weekly* (Mayfield, 1986, p. 12). This experience and the impact it had on the laborers convinced Yen that he would dedicate his life to not only literacy but helping the impoverished Chinese have better lives.

We started out to make the people literate, but what good is that if they remain poverty stricken? So, we had to teach them how to be better farmers, breed better animals, grow better crops. Then we found that what they gained as better farmers, they lost by being poor businessmen. So, we had to teach them how to market (Davidson, 1976).

The Chinese government wanted to place consultants in rural villages to assist people with agriculture, community health and other technology advancements. Yen, working through the YMCA in China, took on this task.

Yen recruited 60 experts in not only literacy, but agriculture, health, and the arts to commit to work for ten years in rural villages (Mayfield, 1993). Yen emphasized they must leave their ivory towers and go to the mud huts (Enrong, 1993). They were required to enter the village assuming the position of a day laborer and live and work among the people for a minimum of six months before they could reveal who they were or offer any help or advice. They were to function as a common person with no status or privilege. Their job during the six-month period was to listen, learn, and work (Linxiang, 1993; Mayfield, 1993).

Sixty scholars, university professors, and doctors, decided to go to Hsien. They gave up good jobs, and comfortable homes, and they left their families. They lived in bamboo hovels and mud shanties without windows or conveniences. There were no teahouses, no movies, no tobacco (Kent, 1976).

The Dean of the College of Commerce in Peking resigned, moved into a mud hut, and spent the next three years developing an accounting program, a simple and foolproof accounting system that our peasants can use (Davidson, 1976).

This parallels the activity of Christ highlighted in the Christ hymn in Philippians. Christ gave up his privileged position, not clinging to his status, to enter into humanity, personally experiencing our reality. “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself

nothing by taking the very nature of a servant” (Philippians 2:6,7). So too would these leaders and academics give up their privileges and status and enter into the reality of the peasants. Linxiang noted those involved would “learn from them ... to work and live with the peasants because through deep contacts they would understand how to better serve the needs of the peasants” (1993).

This was a clear embodiment of kenosis, the self-emptying and embracing of servanthood explained in the Christ hymn. The benefit became readily recognizable. The scholars began to more completely understand the world of the peasant. It was what Raguin stated regarding kenosis:

Kenosis, then, places us in a state of receptivity. We develop an instinctive attitude of listening, trying to understand, letting ourselves be permeated with the atmosphere of our surroundings, passing beyond what is merely heard and seen to reach the personality of the people with whom we love, or those we may meet. (Raguin, 1973, p. 111)

At the end of the 6 month period, they convened and shared their insights and structured all their interventions with the villages through the leaders in the villages using appropriate technology and pedagogy (Mayfield, 1993). They learned from the people the areas that should be first addressed. They relinquished the power to set agendas.

This relinquishing of the power that is typically used in the world, and the embracing of a different type of power, the power of radical subordination, gives leaders insight into which kinds of causation, community building, and intervention methods work best (Yoder, 1994). Leaders gain a different perspective on the people they seek to help.

I have found that the masses are not as dull and lazy as it has been commonly believed. They lack not basic intelligence, but rather the opportunity to relate their abilities to a cause. When confronted with a summons to lift themselves and serve their people, they respond. (Bartlett, 1976, p. 21)

With this new perspective on peasant ability came a willingness to place into their hands the ability to shape their future themselves. Outside leaders took more of a back seat. “Outsiders can help but insiders must do the job” (Hall, 1976). “To make the most of their manpower, they hit on the idea of making teachers of students, and they saw knowledge pass from man to man and village to village in an ever widening circle” (Kent, 1976). Outsiders took more and more of a back-seat position and functioned as advisors when asked. By relying on grassroots leaders, they learned to adjust their expectations, in terms of time, to the time table of the peasant.

The peasant farmer cannot be hurried into new ways. Long exploitation has taught him to be shrewdly wary of innovations, especially those offered by outsiders. You have to bring gradually into play such incentives as a brighter future for his children, his wish to gain prestige in his community, the promise of added income. (Hall, 1976, p. 160)

By practicing kenosis, limiting the expression of outside leaders in providing plans, goals, introducing without request new technologies or techniques to the peasant, the people developed their latent talents. This ensured the long-term goal of transformation.

We develop something in them they never had before. The peasants' minds and hearts must undergo a revolutionary change which is subtle and invisible. Your end is to help generate something new in the heads and hearts of the peasant people who have lost faith in everybody, including themselves. You tell them not to resign completely to their fate, they can better themselves. (Mayfield, 1986)

The program expanded to other provinces and expanded in emphases.

Cooperatives were started by the people to not only market their goods but purchase supplies. Health clinics run by peasants sprang up in villages. Peasants started newspapers, arts organizations, schools, banks, and agricultural societies (Mayfield, 1986). These came about from needs the people themselves identified and initiatives the people themselves launched and led.

Yen's work spanned over 60 years and when he founded the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction he ensured that his work would continue in other areas around the world long after his death. His concepts of assisting the poor reflected many key elements from the Christ Hymn in Philippians.

### *Summary*

Yen's approach to leading peasants captures the central ideas in Paul's Christ Hymn of humility, servanthood, self-sacrifice, and relinquishing of status. Yen was dealing with a people group that had been convinced they lacked knowledge, skills, and even will to address the social, economic, and political issues that affected their lives ensuring a life of poverty and misery. Yen understood that if progress was to be made in alleviating poverty, it must be anchored within the people themselves. They had to be convinced that they had the ability to reshape their world. It wasn't enough to change circumstances; a radical change had to come about in how people thought about themselves.

Yen captured the essence of kenosis (self-emptying or radical subordination) in the Christ hymn by (a) requiring experts and leaders to relinquish their status and assume the lifestyle of the peasants, living and working like and with them; (b) prohibiting the experts from imposing their theories and ideas on the people and instead requiring them to actively learn from the peasants their views of their situation and issues most important to them; (c) refusing experts to assume leadership positions but rather to assume the role of a servant and identify and train leaders within the community; (d) facilitating the learning of the peasants, helping them address issues they identify and using those issues to foster more inquiry; and (e) empowering peasants to train other leaders thus accelerating the change process in the community.

By taking such an approach, Yen created an environment that was safe and nurturing. He gave the peasants space and time to discover hidden potential and untapped power. This encouraging atmosphere could not have been developed apart from the application of the idea of kenosis. Another key leader, this time located in Appalachia, seemed to discover the same principles.

### *Myles Horton and Highlander Folk School*

Horton was born in 1905 and grew up in rural Tennessee, in Appalachia. He remembers his family as not being poor but being, "conventional people who didn't have



any money” (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1990, p. 3). He grew up with a Presbyterian religious emphasis.

Horton attended Cumberland University and while there participated in conducting vacation Bible Schools in rural areas. It was the mid-1920s and in Horton’s words, “the depression hit the rural south a long time before it was felt in New York” (1990, p 22). While teaching kids and living in their community, Horton was struck by the severe poverty and needs surrounding him and he began to wonder how to address those needs. He didn’t have any answers but thought the local people should at least be talking about it. He called the parents of the children in his vacation Bible School and held a meeting in Ozone, Tennessee, to get them talking about their problems and their needs. At first, they looked to him for answers. He was careful to tell them he had none. To his and to the participants’ surprise, people began to suggest remedies or approaches to some of the specific problems their peers were encountering as they heard them raise the issues. Not all problems were solved or addressed, but sufficient discussion and solutions arose that Horton realized the leader didn’t have to know all the answers. Sometimes the people know them. He also realized that one of the best ways he could serve the people was to become a resource and networker, putting people in touch with officials or experts who could help them. This period at Ozone would be an important experience in Horton’s life. He often used his time in Ozone as a template or guide. When reading a new idea, he would ask himself, “How would this work in Ozone?” (Horton et al., 1990, p. 24). His experiences in these rural mountain communities led him to explore various types of solutions to addressing the problem of poverty.

Horton enrolled at Union Theological Seminary and while at Union he heard of the Danish Folk School movement. He traveled to Denmark to view it first hand and to learn from them. He was intrigued by the effect the Folk School movement had upon Danish youth and adults and thought a similar approach might be successful in the mountains of Appalachia. In 1932, he founded the Highlander Folk School (now the Highlander Research and Education Center) and moved into rural Tennessee to live and work with Appalachians. He became involved in training labor leaders for the growing labor movement and eventually became involved in training civil rights leaders for the growing civil rights movement. Key leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Bernice Robinson, and Septima Clark were trained at Highlander.

Horton states the people in the context know much more about and have better perspective of their situation than any leader not a part of the community ever could. The realization that the answers reside with the people and that solutions must arise from the people should be a source of humility for leaders that logically leads to self-restraint. The best way to find out what you do and do not know is to spend time with people.

What you've got to find is somebody, some poor man off in that hollow who can talk very well and you have to spend hours and hours and hours with him before he talks and you find out from him what's going on, that's the way you have to do that. If you're going to use this as an adult education program you don't go in there to help solve problems and tell them how to do it and what to do and who do it for them; what you do is try to get them together to try to discuss it, to try to decide what it is they really want (Horton, 1968a, p. 11).

In Philippians 2:7 the Christ hymn makes a point that Jesus fully took on human likeness, “taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” This is a full identification with the people he came to serve. In similar manner, Horton knew that leaders had to have a strong identification with and understanding of the people they would serve. Listening closely to them was a key. If leaders really listened, they would find that not only should trust be placed in people but that people themselves should be the source of goals for the community. Here is another area where the necessity for humility shines through. “It’s the attitude toward the people and a willingness to forego the opportunity to impose your ideas on people which makes the difference. I don’t know any other way to explain the outstanding characteristics” (Horton, 1968b, p. 10).

As respect for the people and confidence in the people increases, Horton states that the leader begins to truly see his or her role in the proper light. The leader is not on equal par with the people or over the people, but under the people. The people have a higher status.

We became less important in the process than the people we were working with. Before we had that insight, we thought at least we were equal with the people we were dealing with. We didn’t know that we had to keep out of the act. Our job is to get them to act. Then we reacted to that action and used whatever we could to bring to bear on. So there was a whole inversion. (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 42)

This is in keeping with Philippians 2:7, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant.” Horton’s drawing attention to the need for leaders to reframe their understanding of their place in the process is similar to Christ relinquishing his status and limiting himself in his Godhood. One way this limitation is manifest involves the need for leaders to withhold their perspectives on issues until asked.

No matter how well the leader can see people’s problems or paths to solutions, there must be restraint from circumventing the process of the people discovering solutions and new paths of action themselves.

I knew more about their problems than they did, but I couldn't tell them that. I never, never put down a problem on the blackboard or listed a problem they didn't list, even though I knew it was their problem, and I didn't do what I see some people doing today. I didn't put it in my own words and revise it to make it clear. I've seen that happen in these training programs, for somebody will say something and they'll rewrite it so it makes more sense. (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 166)

This restraint doesn’t mean the leader is silent or never offers guidance or ideas. There is a place for the leader to share what he or she knows, but how it’s done and when it’s done is more important than what he or she actually says. Horton states:

I very seldom tell people what my position is on things when they're having discussions, because I don't think it's worth wasting my breath until they ask a question about it. When asked about it I'm delighted to tell them. Until they pose the question that has some relevance to them, they're not going to pay any attention to it. I just think that's not a good way to function educationally. I don't have a problem about this imposing on people.

I do think if I have an idea, if I believe something, I've got to believe it's good for everybody. It can't be just good for me. Now if I believe I've got some reason for believing it, and I've come to that belief by a lot of processes, we've talked about some of them already, that I have a right to assume that other people, if they were exposed to some of the things I've been exposed to, if they have some of the learning experiences I've had, they might come to that same conclusion. So I'm going to try to expose them to some ideas, some learning that was mine, in the hope that they will see the light. If I didn't believe that, I wouldn't think it was very important, I believe. They've got to come at it from their own way. I don't see any problem with taking a position (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 107).

Horton knew that people knew what significant and insignificant involvement is and decided to express this through emphasizing decision-making. Goals, plans and initiatives in at-risk communities must originate with the members of the community (Wallace, 2007). Since community members had been trained to be passive and defer to experts, the people needed training in decision-making on a political, social, and economic level.

They had learned to think, make decisions, not learn gimmicks, not learn techniques, but learn how to think. So, in an effort to help them understand the importance of learning how to think, we gave them, with no strings attached, full control of the week or two weeks they were there (at Highlander). They made every decision about everything: classes, teachers, visitors, subject matter. They resisted that with everything they had because they had never had an opportunity to make decisions in a school, and they thought that was our responsibility. We dealt with that by having each group at the end of the session, say here's what we've learned here, and here's what we propose the next group to do. I think we can share our learning with them and this is what we propose that they do. That was done every session (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 163).

You learn to make decisions by making decisions. Leaders in at-risk settings must release one of their primary tools, the ability to make decisions, into the hands of those who are most affected when decisions are made, the people.

In order for people to develop this skill, it is essential for leaders to create an environment where decision making, at least in the initial stage, is supportive and non-threatening. One thing Horton emphasizes is that the environment be free of experts since people have been socialized to defer to them.

They can't be expected to make decisions in the presence of experts, since they're used to having experts make decisions for them. Given that decision-making is central, it became clear that I had to create a separate place where they could make decisions on things that matter. They had never been allowed to make decisions on anything of importance in their own lives. In a factory, they make decisions within the limits set by a boss. But here, at this new education center I dreamed of creating with other people, they were going to make the decisions, the biggest decisions possible in that set up. They would make all decisions having to do with their stay there, and what they were going to do when they got home. (Horton et al., 1990, p. 56)

## *Summary*

The elements from the Christ hymn of humility, relinquishing of status, servanthood and self-sacrifice, are evident in Horton's approach to leadership in an at-risk community, as well. Horton emphasized to his co-workers that the people were more important in the process than leaders who had come to help them, reframing for the leaders their status. His population, much like Yen's, had to convince themselves that they were not only worthy of the changes they sought but also able to bring about the changes themselves. They had to learn to think about themselves differently.

Horton created an environment where people were not intimidated or embarrassed to step up with their ideas, solutions or plans. In looking at the concept of kenosis in the Christ Hymn we find that Horton captured the very spirit of Paul's exhortation when he (a) required those working with the people to spend hours talking with them, establishing personal relationships that would enable people to trust and speak freely (deep identification); (b) required experts and outside leaders to withhold ideas and theories and instead to listen to what the people identified as possible solutions or problems to address (radical subordination); (c) empowered people to generate their own plans for addressing problems in their community as opposed to relying on experts to give them answers (radical subordination); and (d) facilitated the development of leaders who would in turn train other leaders to accelerate the change process (servanthood). Paul drew attention to Christ who practiced a downward mobility that set aside status and elevated the position of being a servant and closely identifying with those to be served. Horton defined how this looked practically in dealing with a broken and injured people.

### III. OBSERVATIONS: LEARNING FROM JAMES YEN AND MYLES HORTON

The Apostle Paul, in dealing with a population struggling with their Christian identity, sought to change not just their behavior but how they viewed themselves and one another. They had to move from a focus fostered in a competitive and honor-seeking culture in which everyone sought to advance themselves at the expense of others, to a different way of understanding themselves. Paul gave them a different model on which to focus. "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus ..." (Philippians 2:5). In the same manner, Yen and Horton sought to change the mindset of both the colleagues working with them to address poverty, and the population they sought to reach who had to be convinced that they had the power and creativity to change their cultural reality.

Have this same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Phillipians 2:5,6)

The Philippian hymn emphasized an emptying of status, setting aside of rights and plans to embrace the role of servant. Both Yen and Horton sought to instill in their leaders the discipline of subordinating their goals and dreams. Rather than enter the community as experts with a prearranged strategy, they must enter the community as a servant, build relationships and trust with the people, and work and live with them to more completely understand their reality as well as their mindset.

Servanthood stands boldly as the theme in the Christ Hymn and poignantly echoes other passages emphasizing the same. In John 14:4–10 Jesus washed the

disciples' feet and modeled for them the leadership style and the leader mindset of those who follow him. In Matthew, Jesus states:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:25–28)

In 1 Peter the apostle admonishes leaders to:

Care for the flock that God has entrusted to you. Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly—not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve God. Don't lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your own good example. (1 Peter 5:2–4)

Without directly naming their approach as a form of servant leadership, both Yen and Horton employ methods and mindsets that define how servant leadership operates. Knowing how oppressive leaders had been within these communities in the past and how yielding to them had wounded and distorted the identity of those within the community, both Yen and Horton required their leaders to subordinate their skills and ambitions, lower their social status, and focus on elevating the status and contributions of the community. As leaders they would truly serve.

A deeper understanding of leadership that serves is found in the passage in Isaiah 42 defining the servant of the Lord. Jesus applies it to himself in Matthew 12:20, "He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice." This passage presents the gentle nature of the servant. The servant operates in a manner that will not break the injured, quench their spirit, or extinguish their hope.

This sensitivity to the precarious emotional and psychological state of those served is understood by both Yen and Horton. They knew that leaders, through top-down approaches and emphasis on their leadership position and expertise, would silence and further injure those in the community. For the community and its inhabitants to rise from the dust of despair into a new life of self-determination, the figurative death of the leader is required. This dying is in reality a self-emptying. Jesus stated, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:34–35). This losing of one's life need not only mean physical death, but a figurative death, an emptying of one's self of anything that impedes obtaining the ideal life or outcome.

Both Horton's and Yen's expressions of love for the people in at-risk communities involved this process of kenosis, self-emptying or radical subordination. They required leaders to empty themselves of (a) personal goals for the community; (b) definitions of success for the community; (c) the right to exercise their gifts, skills or talents at will; (d) their ambition to excel in the eyes of their peers or to garner glory; (e) personal financial gain; (f) the need to amass or wield power; and (g) even the right to live where they pleased. Yen and Horton both spoke of this as a continual struggle for the leaders, one they would face daily.

Yen's and Horton's methods of leadership, in which the leader first identifies with the people, then learns from the people, sensitizes the leader to cultural realities

previously unknown to the leader. This education shapes how the leader practices radical subordination. How do the people perceive the leader? How fragile or apprehensive are the people about acting on their own? What are the types of problems the people want addressed, and how will the leader's input affect group cohesion or interaction? How can the leader act in a manner to develop grassroots leaders?

Radical subordination does not mean the leader acts as though he or she has no skills or abilities. This robs the community of the leader's expertise and communicates to the community members that the leader is less than transparent. Horton's and Yen's approach was to hold their knowledge and skill in abeyance until asked to share by the community members and even then, given the context, problem, and place in the development process of community members, they demonstrated they may not make their skills or knowledge available. Ultimately, the focus was on community members rising up and taking responsibility for their lives and futures. Any hindrance to that required restraint on the part of the leader.

People will not be fully liberated from paternalistic thinking and lifestyles of dependency until they assume personal and corporate responsibility for their future. For this to happen, Horton and Yen made it clear that leaders had to set aside their tendency to take over and direct, relying on their skills to get the job done. Their skills and ability could be a hindrance if unchecked. They are called upon to release confidence in their expertise to accomplish the task. Paul speaks of his need to let go of spheres of misplaced confidence when he states:

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. (Philippians 3:4–7)

As the apostle learned to place his confidence in other than his natural talents and abilities, so too Yen and Horton emphasized that those leading in at-risk communities must shift their confidence from themselves to the members of the community. Leaders in at-risk communities must ensure that community members be fully engaged in every stage of the planning and implementation of programs or initiatives within the community. Failure to conduct programs and initiatives with the involvement of grassroots people at every juncture may lead to short-term goal attainment but also contribute to long-term perpetuation of a dependency mentality. In approaching this task, the leader must create a supportive environment where community members can participate and learn from one another.

This refusal to concentrate leadership, expertise, or power within a chosen few is addressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians when in chapter twelve he delineates the necessity of different members of a community exercising specific gifts to benefit the community. Concentration of attention or power to a few robs a community of latent gifts and stunts the development of leadership.

Creating such a supportive environment requires leaders to discipline themselves in a manner that for many would be foreign. For so long, the focus of leadership discussions has been on leaders and their traits and gifts. By contrast, to empower

people who are struggling to reject the lie of dependency, to have the courage to make decisions, and utilize their gifts requires the leader to restrain their own skills and abilities to provide room for the emerging talents of those in impoverished communities.

In the first chapter of Philippians we see the apostle Paul dealing directly with problems arising from community members adopting the prevailing attitudes of their greater culture that emphasized seeking honor, prestige, and positions of power and wealth. His exhortation through the Christ hymn in Philippians 2:5–11 provides a powerful counter argument and model to shape the minds of church members and inspire them to rise to greater devotion and how that devotion would look. Drawing attention to this profound truth of the power of kenosis, or radical subordination, provided a foundation for how both leaders and church members were to conduct themselves. The power of this truth extends beyond the church, as Yen and Horton have demonstrated, and offers a key principle for reaching at-risk communities.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The Christ hymn in Philippians 2:5–11 presents a powerful challenge to all but especially those aspiring to be leaders within the Christian church. What this paper has shown is that the concepts within the hymn of deep identification with those served, kenosis (self-emptying or radical subordination of skills and abilities of leaders), servanthood, and self-sacrifice are applicable outside the church in various realms of leadership but especially in leadership in at-risk communities.

The problems and mindsets common to at-risk communities pose unique and formidable challenges requiring a reevaluation of the traditional methods and strategies implemented to assist those suffering under the weight of poverty. Top-down, command and control leadership approaches where outside experts and leaders enter a community and impose a solution designed to address poverty, fail. A different type of leadership is needed.

The Christ hymn contains within it key principles ideally suited for application in at-risk settings. The principle of lowering one's status and functioning as a servant in order to change the mindset of those served to embrace their own leadership abilities was also shown to be essential as leaders seek to address poverty. The concept of kenosis, found in verse seven in the passage in the Christ hymn, was defined as 'radical subordination' of the leader's skills, plans and abilities and was shown to be a key concept leaders must practice. Also were found, the principle of strong identification with people and the principle of requiring the people served to become leaders, making decisions and planning the kinds of programs or initiatives to address poverty in their communities.

The practical application of these principles has been demonstrated through the lives of two key super-leaders, James Yen and Myles Horton, who dealt with two very different but at the same time very similar populations in at-risk communities. Both found, through trial and error, the same principles that the apostle Paul articulated in the Christ hymn to be an essential practice in helping the poor alter their identity and begin the process of rising from a dependency mindset. By adhering to these principles, Yen and Horton, in two separate populations on two separate continents, demonstrated how personal and community identity is transformed as those residing in the community are

given responsibility, with assistance from sensitive leaders practicing radical subordination, to plan and implement changes that better their lives.

The principles in the Christ hymn articulate an approach to leadership too often foreign to domains outside the church and sometimes lacking within the church (as Paul demonstrates). This kenotic approach to leadership was shown to be foundational in leading at-risk communities.

However, questions come to mind. How completely could one apply the kenotic principles found in the Christ hymn to an organizational setting? How would adjusting the depth of application of these principles affect their impact? What type of modern organization would lend itself more completely to the kenotic leadership style found in the Christ Hymn? What can we realistically expect of leaders in large corporations in relation to identification with those they lead? And finally, is there enough difference in kenotic leadership represented in the Christ hymn to differentiate it from servant leadership?

Although the Christ hymn was written to refocus and redirect the lives of believers in the church in Philippi, the principles within it have in this paper been shown to apply outside that setting. Lurking behind these realities is the question of whether or not leaders have the creativity, courage and commitment to apply them.

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