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ROLLINS  
SCHOOL OF  
PUBLIC  
HEALTH

Interfaith Health Program

Hubert Department of Global Health

Title Boundary Leadership for Breaking Ground

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Date 2006

Location Chicago

Background Dr. Gunderson spoke at the 2006 Congress on Urban Ministry of the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education (SCUPE) in Chicago. His presentation connected Dr. Gunderson's original conception of boundary leadership to the ongoing work to address social, economic, and health disparities in America's large cities.

Our urban communities are breaking—that is plain to see and well documented by any and every relevant discipline or field of practice. But while many see our cities as breaking down, boundary leaders see them as breaking open to new possibilities toward which our leadership is called.

### **Breaking down and breaking open**

The Bible is of mixed mind about breaking things, broken things, and the circumstances under which breaking happens. Brokenness draws God's attention. Broken communities, bones, promises, families, hearts, nature systems, and cycles draw God's attention. We learn early in Sunday school through the gospel story of sin, cross, and resurrection that fixing brokenness is God's whole point. Eyes of faith recognize brokenness as the incompleteness that will be made whole one day. Thus, while brokenness litters our relationships and communities, the mark of failure is not the last word. For God is not finished and has not left us alone. Consequently, brokenness also marks the "not yet," the incomplete that God intends to complete, renew, redeem.

Brokenness is not just that which is to be fixed but also the very path toward wholeness. "Breaking ground" is not the name of the ceremony that launches a building, but the name of the place itself. Many of us experience our cities as places where we come to break, to be broken open. Indeed, it is the reason we come, for through being broken we are made whole. Nothing new happens without breaking the old. This is the pervasive truth of eggs and omelets, wine and wineskins, seeds and gardens. birth and being born again, repentance and forgiveness.

This brings us back to this brokenness that faith wants to make whole, but away from the false wholeness that faith wants to break open. We break ground even as we break bread so that we cannot possibly forget this truth that the world sees as paradox. It is no paradox, however, just basic straightforward gospel: We are made whole by God alone, for God so loved the world that he broke himself open so that we could be whole. All the rest is footnotes.

Some fear the breaking as the loss of what has protected for them—privileges, power, positions and possessions. Others see breaking as an opportunity to exploit patterns of weakness and vulnerability that favor untethered power and unaccountable ambition.

Jonas Salk, the philosopher scientist, wrote in *Survival of Wisest*, that the future of our species depended on our capacity to act wisely in the face of large scale ecological change. He believed that humanity was entering a time of profound discontinuity and yet he hoped that we could be wise. He knew that our capacity to adapt to unprecedented challenges is not wired into our genes (as it is in many animals), but embedded in our capacity to discern our times and act appropriately.

Urban centers have always been turbulent zones of discontinuity, the places where the future meets the past and moves on. Chicago was not so very long ago the boundary of the western frontier. It is again a kind of frontier—a shifting boundary zone between globalized cultures, economic paradigms based on escalating technology change and faiths (plural) counting on principalities and powers that contest for our allegiance, our fear and our hope.

The SCUPE Congress is designed for those of us who live and lead in these places of deep discontinuity, and who do so as a journey of faith and hope. We are in the urban wilderness because our faith calls us there, but also because our faith is confirmed there. We see in our own lives signs of emergence, of life breaking through even as the old social and institutional systems are dis-integrated right around us. The old systems change function and potential driven by new patterns of fear, hope and confidence, mostly without any of us finding good language to talk about it all. We are finding that the language of boundary zones is a good description for where we are living because we sense that more and more of our community is broken open as the institutions become more loosely connected. This breaking open is happening within each of our little systems (health care, social services, our churches, government, various businesses). That parochial breaking open is also generalized between systems, but often hard to see because of the trauma within systems. We often think it is just our system, when it is the whole.

So how then do we live? How then do we lead?

Boundary Leadership is a leadership practice emerging from discontinuity. It assumes open space — boundary zones—in which leadership is possible in ways that are different from times dominated by stable systems.

Boundary leaders facilitate dis-integration and re-alignment at the same time because they do not mourn the past or fear the future. They do not stake their faith and hope on the old forms while having great compassion for the human caught in them. Most of us work for structures and organizations that were formed from the old, yet are breaking open to the new (albeit with greater and less levels of confidence and fear).

Boundary leadership helps us get our name right and it helps us align our lives with God's hope that is trying to emerge in the broken spaces in which we live. This is important personally, for it helps us live in reality. But boundary leadership is more important than that. Alternative futures are determined by the critical mass of boundary leaders because they create new patterns of fear, hope and confidence. If (a big if) these hopes, fears and confidences are adapted to reality, they endure to become the basis for stable relationships, which in turn become the scaffolding for new institutions, systems and culture.

The future of our urban centers is emerging through the web of relationships boundary leaders are creating right now. Quite literally, though often without realizing it, urban ministers are creating amazingly vital webs that offer glimpses of what might be possible. These new relationships gain important efficiencies from alignment with the new potentials. And the relationships make possible innovations reflecting multiple intelligences needed to perceive the path toward hope and survival. In the most nitty gritty kind of way, they “fit.”

Boundary leadership is a kind of spiritual practice, although most of it takes place outside the walls of our churches and is frequently conducted in language that bridges faith and secular. But it is unmistakably faith work, for it leans into the unknown and trusts on the substance of that which is not yet seen. It moves beyond mere data and extends itself in intentional vulnerability. It is not faith held in the head, but faith that opens itself to all that is breaking open. Boundary leaders are often surprised by who they find themselves with in the boundary zones—surprised by who is there, and who is not, by who they recognize as kin and those who now seem of the past. Sometimes they are surprised by how resonant and relevant old hymns are and they realize that many generations have preceded them in this journey of faith. And sometimes they are surprised by new songs and rituals that echo their deepest hope.

Boundary leaders need each other. They need to be with each other in order to learn, to be encouraged, to raise up their hopes in worship that integrates their lament and hope. This is why we gather in March of 2006 in one of the great boundary urban centers. We will create an open space in which we help each other move to a new level of faith and hope in the vital boundary zones.

We will help each other find ourselves through the open spaces we create for three great days. We will find each other through constantly shifting kaleidoscope of opportunities that identify ourselves by faith, geography, issue, practice, academic discipline and even our dreams.

We will teach other through a rich offerings of intellect and practice in a variety of forms: lecture, panel, experience, round table dialogue, speed learning (sort of like speed dating, except with posters). Boundary leadership is not just an inspiring idea; it is a set of practices that can be done better or worse. So we will learn from some of the best. Some of the visions will be brought by people we know by name, such as Bill Moyers while others are emergent voices pointing with their young lives toward what is still possible. (We need to fill in a long list of folks here.....)

We will worship with old and new songs, in old forms and others that will emerge, like God's hope, in the open spaces we dare to embrace together. Chicago is a center of theological study and faithful practice. But it is also the epicenter of improv comedy and of music of many blended genres. So we will lament and we will laugh, in both cases more deeply because we are together in the world that is breaking down and yet breaking open to the new.

In short, March of 2006 will give boundary leaders from across the nation an opportunity to experience together the vital possibilities of living where they are—in the urban boundary zones.