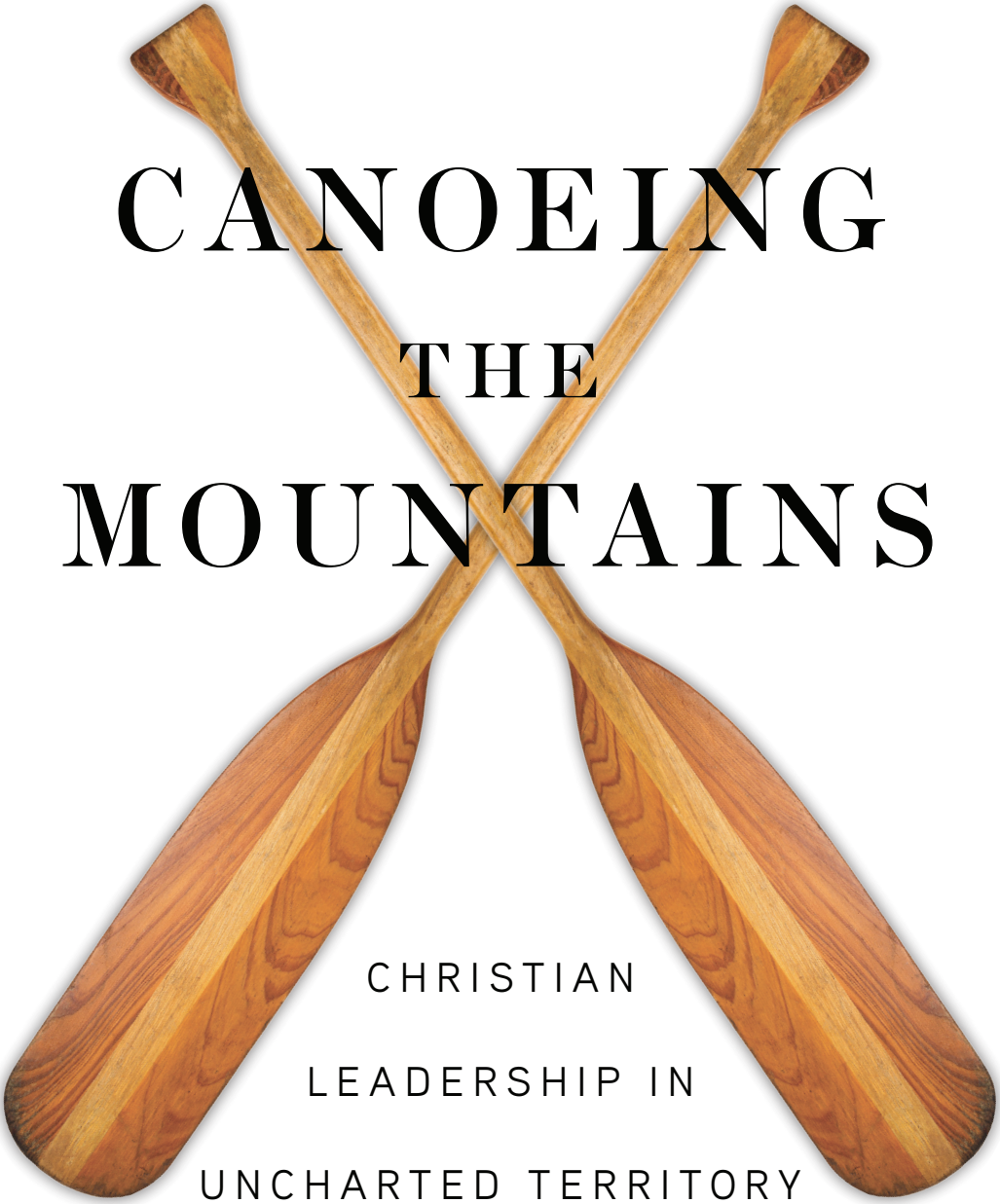


TOD BOLSINGER

Two wooden canoe paddles are crossed in an 'X' shape, centered behind the title text. The paddles are made of light-colored wood with visible grain patterns. The blades are wide and slightly curved, while the shafts are straight and taper towards the ends.

CANOEING THE MOUNTAINS

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LEADERSHIP IN
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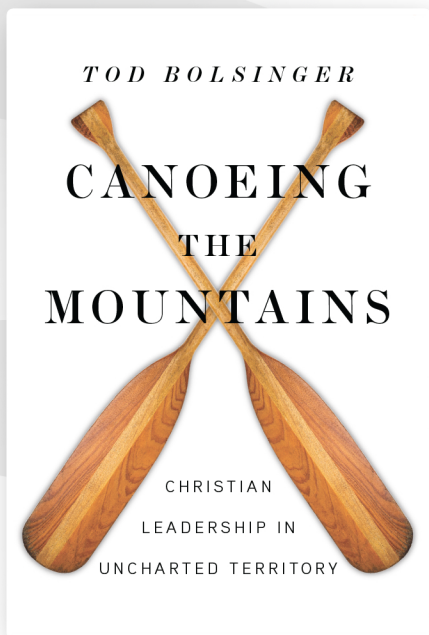
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Drawing from his extensive experience as a pastor and consultant, Tod Bolsinger brings decades of expertise in guiding churches and organizations through uncharted territory. He offers a combination of illuminating insights and practical tools to help you reimagine what effective leadership looks like in our rapidly changing world.

"Bolsinger brings a scholar's mind, a pastor's heart and a wealth of leadership and consulting experience to the task. His ability to translate the most important organizational leadership material into the day-to-day challenges of the Christian leader is without peer."

—**Mark Labberton**, president, Fuller Theological Seminary

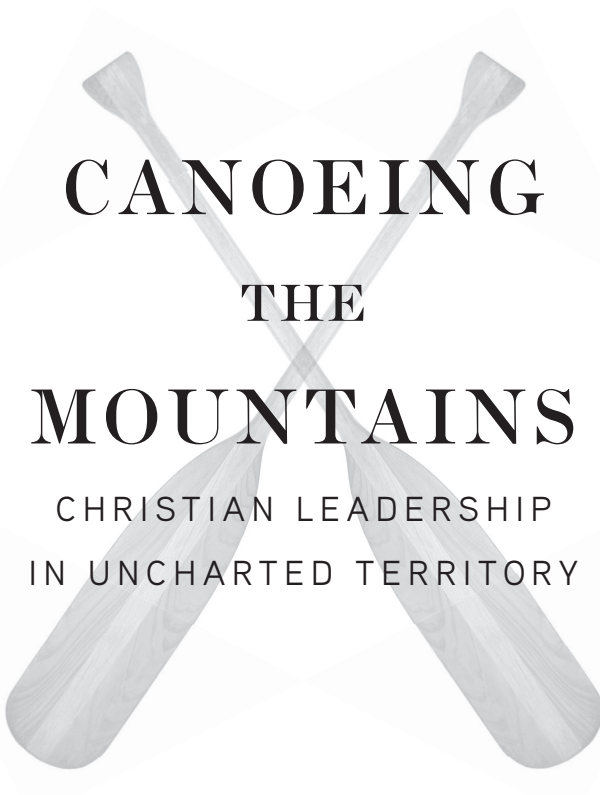


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Tod Bolsinger

Author of *Canoeing the Mountains*
Vice President for Vocation and Formation
and Assistant Professor of Practical Theology
at Fuller Theological Seminary





CANOEING THE MOUNTAINS

CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP
IN UNCHARTED TERRITORY

TOD BOLSINGER


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Part One

UNDERSTANDING UNCHARTED TERRITORY

The World in Front of You Is Nothing
Like the World Behind You

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Seminary Didn't Prepare Me for This

*If western societies have become post-Christian mission fields,
how can traditional churches become then missionary churches?*

DARRELL GUDER, "THE MISSIOLOGICAL CONTEXT"



TWO PASTORS SIT AT A BAR . . .

One night after a long day of meetings, an older pastor let out a heavy sigh. He was nearing retirement, and we were working together on a project that was supposed to reorganize our entire denomination in order to help our church better minister in a changing world. And *that* changing world weighed on him. He remembered well how not that long ago life was different. He swirled his drink and said to me, "You know, when I began my ministry in a church in Alabama, I never worried about church growth or worship attendance or evangelism. Back then, *if a man didn't come to church on Sunday, his boss asked him about it at work on Monday.*"

Sociologists and theologians refer to this recently passed period as Christendom, the seventeen-hundred-year-long era with Christianity at the privileged center of Western cultural life.¹ Christendom gave us "blue laws" and the Ten Commandments in school. It gave us "under God" in the pledge of allegiance and exhortations to Bible reading in the national newspapers. (I have a copy of the *Los Angeles Times* from December 1963 that has stories on the Warren Commission, the nine-thousand-member Hollywood Presbyterian Church and a list of daily Bible readings for the upcoming week. Can

you even imagine the *Los Angeles Times* exhorting people to read their Bibles today?) It was the day when every “city father” laid out the town square with the courthouse, the library and a First Church of _____ within the center of the city.

For most of us these days are long gone. (For some of us, that is good news indeed. Did you notice the reference to “man” in my friend’s statement?) When cities are now considering using eminent domain laws to replace churches with tax-revenue generating big-box stores, when Sundays are more about soccer and Starbucks than about Sabbath, when Christian student groups are getting derecognized on university campuses, when the fastest growing religious affiliation among young adults is “none,” when there is no moral consensus built on Christian tradition (even among Christians), when even a funeral in a conservative beach town is more likely to be a Hawaiian style “paddle out” than a gathering in a sanctuary, then Christendom as a marker of society has clearly passed.²

Over the last ten years I have had one church leader after another whisper to me the same frustrated confession: “Seminary didn’t train me for this. I don’t know if I can do it. I just don’t know . . .” A number of pastors are ready to throw in the towel. Studies show that if given a chance to do something else, most pastors would jump at it. Reportedly, upwards of fifteen hundred pastors leave the ministry *every month*.³

A couple of years ago I learned that three of my pastor friends around the country had resigned *on the same day*. There were no affairs, no scandals and no one was renouncing faith. But three good, experienced pastors turned in resignations and walked away. One left church ministry altogether. The details are as different as the pastors themselves, but the common thread is that they finally got worn down by trying to bring change to a church that was stuck and didn’t know what to do. Their churches were stuck and declining, stuck and clinging to the past, stuck and lurching to quick fixes, trying to find an easy answer for what were clearly bigger challenges. What all three churches had in common was that they were mostly blaming the pastor for how bad it felt to be so stuck.

“If only you could preach better!”

“If only you were more pastoral and caring!”

“If only our worship was more dynamic!”

“Please, pastor, *do* something!” (That is what we pay you for, isn’t it?)

And to make matters worse, the *pastors* don’t know what to do either. As a seminary vice president, I am now charged with confronting this reality head-on. Our graduates were not trained for this day. When I went to seminary, we were trained in the skills that were necessary for supporting faith in Christendom. When churches functioned primarily as vendors of religious services for a Christian culture, the primary leadership toolbox was

- *teaching* (for providing Christian education)
- *liturgics* (for leading Christian services)
- *pastoral care* (for offering Christian counsel and support)

In this changing world we need to add a new set of leadership tools. And this applies equally well to Christians serving in leadership beyond the parish. The challenges of a changing world come even more rapidly in business, education and nonprofit leadership. And while this book’s primary audience is congregational leaders, I have added some material specifically for Christian leaders in other contexts.

This is a guidebook for learning to lead in a world we weren’t prepared for. Our guides will be none other than the first American adventurers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark.

Lewis and Clark’s expedition to explore the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase was built on a completely false expectation. They believed, like everyone before them, that the unexplored west was exactly the same geography as the familiar east. This is the story of what they did when they discovered that they—and everyone else before them—had been wrong. And how instructive and inspiring that story can be to us today.

Using the story of Lewis and Clark’s expedition and applying the best insights from organizational leadership and missional theology, we will learn together what it means for Christians to lead when the journey goes “off the map.”

We will discuss and seek faithful responses to the following questions:

- How do we lead a congregation or an organization to be faithful to the mission God has put before us when the world has changed so radically?
- What are the tools, the mental models, the wise actions and competing commitments that require navigation?

- And mostly, what transformation does it demand of those of us who have been called to lead?

From Lewis and Clark we will learn that if we can adapt and adventure, we can thrive. That while leadership in uncharted territory requires both learning and loss, once we realize that the losses won't kill us, they can teach us. And mostly, we will learn that to thrive off the map in an exciting and rapidly changing world means learning to let go, learn as we go and keep going no matter what.

As a seminary administrator, a professor of practical theology, an ordained minister, a consultant on organizational change and an executive coach for leaders, I have written this book with three purposes in mind:

1. To reframe this moment of history for Christians in the west as an opportunity put before us by God for adventure, hope and discovery—all the while embracing the anxiety, fear and potential loss that comes from answering this call.
2. To recover the calling for the church to be a truly missional movement that demands leadership that will take up the gauntlet of Guder's charge: "If western societies have become post-Christian mission fields, how can traditional churches become then missionary churches?"⁴
3. To discover—even more than the uncharted territory around us—the capacity for leadership within us.

This book is structured around five vital lessons that every leader of a Christian congregation or organization has to learn to lead in uncharted territory:

1. *Understanding uncharted territory: The world in front of you is nothing like the world behind you.* In chapter one I share my personal encounter with the disorientation that comes from a changing world and the common experience that many Christian leaders face today. In chapter two we are introduced to Lewis and Clark and the unexpected challenges they faced. In chapter three we will learn a model for leadership in uncharted territory that will orient us for the terrain ahead.
2. *The on-the-map skill set: No one is going to follow you off the map unless they trust you on the map.* Chapter four reminds us that there is plenty of work to be done—and credibility to be won—in the everyday experiences of

administrating, teaching and caring for people. Indeed, without demonstrating technical competence *on the map*, a leader will never be given the chance to lead a true expedition *off the map*. Chapter five helps us understand that even competence is not enough without the personal congruence and character of a leader. Only when a leader is deeply trusted can he or she take people further than they imagined into the mission of God. Chapter six introduces the critical issue of the leader's responsibility to shape a healthy organizational culture. Trust is not just a one-on-one relationship between a leader and follower, but the organizational air that allows a transforming adventure to be even possible.

3. *Leading off the map: In uncharted territory, adaptation is everything.* In chapters seven to eleven we get to the heart of the book and the critical leadership capacities needed in a changing world. In these chapters we integrate the very best leadership and organizational theories from people like Ronald Heifetz, Ed Friedman, Patrick Lencioni, John Kotter and Jim Collins with the insights and values of the Scriptures and Christian theology. Chapter seven is an in-depth study of adaptive leadership, helping us understand that adaptive challenges require *learning*, facing *loss* and negotiating the *gaps* of our values and actions. Chapter eight takes us into the realm of organizational systems thinking, and gives us a clear perspective on the underlying dynamics in every family, congregation, company or organization that deeply affects our best leadership intentions. In chapter nine we learn the process of adaptive learning and leadership that enables us to find new, innovative answers to lingering and persistent challenges. Chapter ten teaches a key leadership *principle* (the mission trumps) and the central leadership *practice* for uncharted territory: start with conviction, stay calm, stay connected and stay the course. And in chapter eleven we hit the hardest patch of all: how we stay calm when navigating *loss*.
4. *Relationships and resistance: You can't go alone, but you haven't succeeded until you've survived the sabotage.* In chapters twelve and thirteen we take up the unmistakably *relational* dynamic of adaptive leadership. From Lewis and Clark's friendship and one-of-kind (and highly unorthodox!) leadership partnership we get a lens for looking at the big bias of most

discussions of leadership: the “lonely at the top” leader. In these chapters we go beyond the usual discussions of teams and collaboration to discuss the *six types* of relationships and the radical kind of collaboration necessary for leading in uncharted territory. Chapter thirteen reminds us that the necessity of relationships is also the greatest peril. We will learn in the words of Ed Friedman, “You have not accomplished change until you have survived the sabotage.”⁵

5. *Transformation: Everybody will be changed (especially the leader)*. T. S. Eliot wrote that the “end of our exploring” was to “arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.”⁶ The last two chapters and epilogue challenge most of our assumptions about leadership, change and growth. Chapter fourteen reminds us that in the same way that Lewis and Clark would have failed—or even died—in the wilderness without the help of a Native American mother, we who have been trained in a Christendom context will never thrive as leaders as long as the majority-world voices around us are silenced. Learning from those who are most at home in uncharted territory is one of the great opportunities that most leaders miss. Chapter fifteen brings home the ultimate value and gift of leading into uncharted territory: our own ongoing transformation. The epilogue reminds us that in God’s church, no one is left behind. The whole body of Christ is going on an adventure—or at least preparing the way for God’s people to move ahead through the leadership legacy we leave behind.

And to be sure, these were lessons that I had to learn personally—and often the hard way.

WHEN YOU DISCOVER THAT YOU ARE THE PROBLEM

At the end of our 2006–2007 fiscal year, San Clemente Presbyterian Church (SCPC) had a \$100,000 general fund *surplus*. In twenty years of church work I had never seen anything like it. By all common measures we were doing as well as we could hope. We were in our tenth consecutive year of growth, we had unified around a shared vision, and we had rebuilt our entire campus. We were starting big initiatives to serve our community, including planting a church, starting a community resource center and starting an additional Spanish-language service.

***REORIENTATION* AND NAVIGATIONAL GUIDE FOR ORGANIZATIONS**

Throughout the book, you will find a series of additional pieces to help you learn how to lead in uncharted territory. *Reorientation* lessons are one- or two-sentence bullet points that help reinforce a concept. In some select chapters the Navigational Guide for Organizations will offer glimpses that expand the conversation to include voices and perspectives of Christians in leadership of companies, mission agencies, educational institutions or other endeavors.

To begin, let's summarize the five vital lessons that make up the structure of this book:

1. The world in front of you is nothing like the world behind you.
2. No one is going to follow you off the map unless they trust you on the map.
3. In uncharted territory, adaptation is everything.
4. You can't go alone, but you haven't succeeded until you've survived the sabotage.
5. Everybody will be changed (especially the leader).

And then we began to notice something. It was subtle, but there was no mistaking that it was there. Right at the moment when we were taking concrete steps to reach out to others for the sake of the gospel, the energy in the church began to wane. We became infected with a kind of malaise, a tangible diminishing of enthusiasm. As the pastor, I was confused. How could we be doing so well and yet feel like something was so wrong?

We brought in a consulting group to take a look under the hood. They led us through an evaluative process and reported back that our scores were really strong; we were among the healthiest churches they had worked with. But they also told us there were some disturbing "early warning signs" that could be traced to an unintended consequence of the past decade's *success*.

The success of a *unified* vision had given birth to an overly *centralized* institution. The very unity, discipline and alignment needed to bring the church

together to rebuild the campus around our vision were now stifling creativity, passion and energy. In an entrepreneurial culture like south Orange County, we had become too corporate. And less people were interested in being part of supporting what they saw was a growing religious institution.

When our consultant, Kevin Graham Ford, laid this out before me, I grimaced.

“So what’s causing this? What’s at the heart of the problem? What do we need to change?” I asked.

That’s when he said the word that changed my life: “You.”

I felt a little queasy.

Kevin continued,

Tod, don’t get me wrong. These people love and respect you. They appreciate your preaching and they trust you. In fact, we have never had a church talk more about a senior pastor than this church talks about you. *And that is the problem.* It’s not your problem, at least not yet. Nobody thinks that you are trying to build the church around you, but that is in fact what is happening. Unconsciously, the message going out is that everybody here thinks it is *their* job to support the ministry that *you* are having here. And that model of leadership is out of date. It’s a model from the past that is unsustainable in a changing world, and is slowly sapping the passion from the church.

Kevin gave me three hard options: (1) do nothing and trust that the church would bounce back, (2) resign and let the church have a new leader, or (3) I could *learn to lead differently*.

I chose option 3. I loved my church and wanted to remain their pastor, and yet I knew something needed to change. Relearning how to lead wasn’t easy. And even now in my role with Fuller Seminary, I have been relearning what it means to lead ever since.

REORIENTATION

Christian Leaders: You were trained for a world that is disappearing.

My story is not unique. For the past decade I have consulted with leaders in a wide variety of contexts: once great urban churches who are now close to closing their doors, small-town congregations who are be-

coming older and smaller, growing immigrant congregations who are struggling with growing pains, denominational leaders facing one rapid-fire crisis

after another, nonprofit boards struggling to stay afloat and find new funding, seminary leaders facing questions about whether they are even relevant anymore.

What we all have in common is that our old strategies no longer work.

LEADERSHIP FOR A CHANGING WORLD

Today's leaders are facing complex challenges that have no clear-cut solutions. These challenges are more systemic in nature and require broad, widespread learning. They can't be solved through a conference, a video series or a program. Even more complicated, these problems are very often the result of yesterday's *solutions*. They are what Ronald Heifetz calls "adaptive challenges."⁷

Adaptive challenges are the true tests of leadership. They are challenges that go beyond the technical solutions of resident experts or best practices, or even the organization's current knowledge. They arise when the world around us has changed but we continue to live on the successes of the past. They are challenges that cannot be solved through compromise or win-win scenarios, or by adding another ministry or staff person to the team. They demand that leaders make hard choices about what to preserve and to let go. They are challenges that require people to learn and to *change*, that require leaders to experience and navigate profound *loss*.

Today, I consult, coach and am on the senior leadership of a seminary dedicated to forming leaders for this changing world. But for me it all began almost ten years ago with understanding that *for our church mission to win I had to lose*. The changing world around us and even the success we had experienced had brought us to a new place where we would need a new strategy. To paraphrase Marshall Goldsmith, "what got us *here* wouldn't take us *there*."⁸ So, I had to lose some of my status, power and control. I had to lose "say" over certain aspects of the mission, and mostly I had to lose my identity as the resident expert and *learn to lead all over again*.

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP, REALLY?

Let's begin by clarifying what leadership is and is not. Leadership is not *authority*. It is not the title or position that a person holds. Leadership is different from management. Leadership is not running good meetings, keeping good books, overseeing good programs and making good policies (as important as

NAVIGATIONAL GUIDE FOR ORGANIZATIONS

Disruption and Discipleship

“Because we are Christians in business and not a ‘Christian business,’ we need more discipleship, not less, to lead in business.” The speaker was the young CEO of a Silicon Valley startup that had just received its first major funding because of his “disruptive technology.” As he considered how his little idea was quickly growing into a company larger than he could imagine, he shared with a group of leaders at a dinner how he was looking for resources, relationships and mostly a lot more wisdom.

Business leaders know about disruption. Indeed, often in business the more disruptive a business plan or innovation, the more it is cherished. But because a Christian views the marketplace as a mission field in need of Christian example, witness and stewardship to reveal God’s working in the world, Christians in disruptive marketplace sectors need as much discernment and discipleship as a commitment to innovation. Education, publishing, fundraising, investment banking, technology, even nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations are all marketplace sectors facing dramatic disruption.

Because the stakes of leadership are experienced tangibly and economically on a daily basis, there is an ever-present temptation to return to a sacred-secular split that separates the moral and spiritual of Sunday morning from the rough and tumble of Monday to Friday. For a Christian this is not merely a hypocritical practice but heretical thinking. The teachings of Jesus—the Lord of all—are the measure of both morals and the marketplace, both worship and the world.

The growing faith-and-work movement points to the reality that marketplace leadership requires wisdom to discern not only right from wrong but also prudent from folly, prescient from rash. For a Christian in the marketplace not only does one’s company depend on the ability to respond to a changing world, but so do the livelihoods of one’s employees and stockholders. In addition, Christians in the marketplace often need to make moral decisions about a technology or business practice when there is no previous experience. They must weigh the possibilities for economic growth for the company with the risks to the company or how it might affect the common good.

This discernment requires ongoing discipleship. Christians who provide leadership to businesses need just as much spiritual and biblical understanding of the priorities of the kingdom of God as they do the economics of market forces. Christians offering leadership in the marketplace, higher education, nonprofits or other sectors have to keep growing in our faith as much as we need to grow professionally. We can't lead a Christian business and organization to further the mission of Jesus (seven days a week!) unless the Christian servant-leaders become more like Jesus (every day)!

those are!). Management is a kind of stewardship. Management cares for what *is*. Leadership is focused on what *can be* or *what must be*. Management is about keeping promises to a constituency; leadership is about an organization fulfilling its mission and realizing its *reason for being*. To that end, let me offer three leadership principles that shape my work in leadership development (mostly in church and nonprofit circles).

1. Leadership is essential. In this book *leadership* doesn't mean titles or authority. (Both are helpful but *not* essential to leadership.) Leadership is not measured by corner offices with heavy furniture, higher salaries or august job descriptions. To be authorized or to have a title does not equate to leadership. Leadership is *a way of being* in an organization, family, team, company, church, business, nation (or any other system) that, in the words of Ronald Heifetz, “[mobilizes] people to tackle tough challenges and thrive.”⁹

Therefore, *leadership is always about personal and corporate transformation*. But because we are hard-wired to resist change, every living system requires someone in it to *live into and lead the transformation necessary to take us into the future* we are resisting. The person who takes personal responsibility to live into the new future in a transformative way, in relationship to the others in the system, is the leader. If someone is not functioning as a leader, the system will always default to the status quo.

2. Leadership is expressed in behaviors. Leaders act. Leaders function. While speaking is indeed a form of behavior, and many leaders are known for their words in times of crisis, leadership is mostly expressed in *actions, relationships and responsibility*. Ed Friedman said, “The leader in the system is the one who is not blaming anyone.”¹⁰ Note: Every one of those words was chosen

deliberately. Leaders are “in the system.” That is, they have stayed *in* relationship with those they are called to lead. You can’t lead from outside the system. (You can be a prophet or critic or consultant or supporter, but not a leader.) At the same time, leaders are *not blaming anyone* (or, for that matter, any circumstance) for the challenges they face but are solely focusing on personal responsibility, looking to what they can *do*—how they can *act*—differently. That *doing* is not just impulsive reacting but thoughtful, reflective responding. Perhaps the single most transformative moment of all is when a leader says, “I don’t know what to do,” and then goes about the hard work of leading the *learning* that will result in a new faithful action.

3. Leadership is developed. I am firmly in the “leaders are made, not born” school, convinced that leadership is a skill that can be taught.¹¹ Just as some have more aptitude for a skill than others, some have more natural abilities and talents that lend themselves to particular leadership in particular circumstances. *But any person who is willing to take personal responsibility, convene a group to work on a tough problem and persist in the face of resistance is a leader.* At the same time, the common inference when people want to learn to be leaders is that it is mostly head knowledge. If we read books and can repeat phrases (e.g., “adaptive challenges”), we think we have learned leadership (which is pretty much like learning to fly a plane from watching a video). But, and this is critical, *leadership is learned in the doing and by reflecting on the doing.* (John Dewey reportedly wrote: “We don’t learn from experience, we learn by reflecting on experience.”)¹² At the same time, even reflection is not enough. Leadership requires developing what Friedman calls “self-regulation.” Because our brains don’t process information and learn well when we are highly anxious, leaders must develop emotional maturity and the ability to persist in complex emotional systems without either distancing or taking resistance personally. Or as the good folks at the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center like to say, leaders must be able to “stay calm, stay connected, and stay the course.”¹³

If we read these truths *backward* we get a dose of harsh reality. Since we are not *developing* leaders, there is a lack of leadership in *action*. Without essential leadership behaviors, most organizations are not growing, not transforming and certainly not facing their toughest challenges or thriving.

The culture is changing, the world is changing rapidly, and churches are facing change on an unprecedented scale. Churches and church leaders are

becoming increasingly irrelevant, even marginalized. Shared corporate faith is viewed with cynicism at best, downright hostility at worst. The cultural advantage we experience during the seventeen centuries of Christendom has almost completely dissipated. Seminary training for the Christendom world is inadequate to this immensely challenging—transformation-demanding—moment in history.

We have to learn to lead all over again.

But the church is also at an exciting crossroads. We are entering a new day, new terrain and a new adventure. We are not alone. The Spirit of God goes before us. The mission of Christ will not fail. A day will come when the “kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). The next steps are going to be demanding. More than anything, this moment requires those of us in positions of authority (and even most of us who are not) to embrace an *adventure-or-die* mindset, and find the courage and develop the capacity for a new day. We are heading into uncharted territory and are given the charge to lead a mission where the future is nothing like the past.

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Adventure or Die

To Captain Meriwether Lewis.

The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri River, & such principal stream of it, as by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific Ocean . . . may offer the most direct and practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce.

**THOMAS JEFFERSON,
LETTER TO MERIWETHER LEWIS**

Conceptually stuck systems cannot become unstuck simply by trying harder. For a fundamental reorientation to occur, that spirit of adventure which optimizes serendipity and which enables new perceptions beyond the control of our thinking processes must happen first.

ED FRIEDMAN, A FAILURE OF NERVE



HE DIPPED HIS HANDS INTO the icy water and took a long cool drink.

Fifteen months of hard travel, a seemingly endless string of days of back-breaking upstream slogging had led to this moment. Meriwether Lewis recalled all that he had endured: Nervous nights in a strange land. Mosquitoes galore. A dark, cold winter. Grizzly bears. A month-long portage around an immense waterfall. The death of a companion.

But he was here.

Lewis and a small scouting party had gone ahead of the rest of the Corps of Discovery to try to make contact with the Shoshone tribe. They had followed a small trail up a creek and now were at the spring itself. This little trickle was the source of the mighty Missouri River. This water would flow all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. They had found what no person of European descent had before them. And the most challenging obstacle on their journey from what was then the United States to the Pacific Ocean was now behind them.

Or so he thought.

For over three hundred years explorers of at least four sovereign nations had been looking for a water route that would connect the Pacific Ocean to the Mississippi River. And everyone *just knew* it was out there somewhere. It was a broadly believed, persistent assumption about the way the world was arranged. This assumption not only inspired the Lewis and Clark journey but fueled a frenetic race for profits and power. President Thomas Jefferson had indeed commissioned Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery for just this moment, declaring that they should find the cherished water route that everyone believed existed and would insure the young nation's prosperity: "The most direct & practicable water communication across this continent, for the purposes of commerce."¹

Finding the water route had been the key to national sovereignty and financial stability for the French, who had been in this new world for centuries, the British, who were mostly in what is now Canada, the Spanish, who controlled the southwest corner of the continent, and the Americans, who had recently purchased the Louisiana Territory from Napoleon Bonaparte. Whoever discovered and made claim to the water route would own the trade route and control the resources of this great continent. It would be like owning the Internet today. This discovery was deemed so vital to national interest that Spain sent two different war parties to intercept and kill the Corps of Discovery.

For Meriwether Lewis, slaking his thirst from that little stream meant that he was about to realize the dream of centuries of pioneers, to fulfill the ambitions of his president and to enter into the pantheon of explorers. His name and his Corps would be remembered as the discoverers of the highly prized Northwest Passage. Lewis believed that he would walk up the hill, look down a gentle slope that would take his men a half day to cross with their canoes on

their backs, and then they would see the Columbia River. After fifteen months of going upstream they looked forward to letting the current swiftly whisk them to the Pacific Ocean. They would crest the hill, find the stream and coast to the finish line.

They could not have been more disappointed.

What Lewis actually discovered was that three hundred years of experts had all been completely and utterly wrong. In front of him was not a gentle slope down to a navigable river running to the Pacific Ocean but the Rocky Mountains. Stretching out for miles and miles as far as the eyes could see was one set of peaks after another.

The road took us to the most distant fountain of the waters of the mighty Missouri in search of which we have spent so many toilsome days and [restless] nights. thus far I had accomplished one of those great objects on which my mind has been unalterably fixed for many years, judge then of the pleasure I felt in [allaying] my thirst with this pure and ice-cold water. . . . here I halted a few minutes and rested myself. two miles below McNeal had exultingly stood with a foot on each side of this rivulet and thanked his god that he had lived to bestride the mighty & heretofore deemed endless Missouri. after refreshing ourselves we proceeded on to the top of the dividing ridge from which I discovered immense ranges of high mountains still to the West of us with their tops partially covered with snow.²

There was no Northwest Passage. No navigable river. No water route. The driving assumption of the brightest, most adventurous entrepreneurial and creative leaders regarding this new world had been absolutely mistaken.

Even more, Lewis's Corps of Discovery had discovered that the entire mental model regarding the continent was wrong as well. For the second assumption at work in the minds of the explorers of the day was that the geography west of the Continental Divide was the same as the geography east of it. All had assumed that in the same way the land rose gently over thousands of miles to a peak, it would also descend gently to the Pacific Ocean. In the same way they had been able to take a keelboat and canoes up a river, they'd be able to drift downriver to the ocean.

To be sure, the Mandans had told Lewis and Clark that the mountains ahead needed to be crossed. But when they thought of mountains, they pictured the rounded tree-topped bluffs of the Appalachians. Even seeing the

peaks looming in front of them for miles didn't compute.³ For no American had ever seen mountains like these. In the words of Corps sergeant John Ordway, "the mountains continue as far as our eyes could extend. They extend much further than we expected."⁴ Or as another said, they were "the most terrible mountains I ever beheld."⁵

And at that moment everything that Meriwether Lewis assumed about his journey changed. He was planning on exploring the new world by boat. He was a river explorer. They planned on *rowing*, and they thought the hardest part was behind them. But in truth everything they had accomplished was only a prelude to what was in front of them.

Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery were about to go off the map and into uncharted territory. They would have to change plans, give up expectations, even reframe their entire mission. What lay before them was nothing like what was behind them. There were no experts, no maps, no "best practices" and no sure guides who could lead them safely and successfully.

The true adventure—the real discovery—was just beginning.

The story of the Corps of Discovery is the driving metaphor for our present moment in history. In every field, in every business, every organization, leaders are rapidly coming to the awareness that the world in front of us is radically different from everything behind us. In the words of futurist and Distinguished Fellow of the Institute for the Future, Bob Johansen, after centuries of stability and slow, incremental change, in less than a generation our world has become VUCA: *volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous*.⁶ This VUCA world will only become more so in the days ahead and *will require all leaders to learn new skills*. What we have learned in our schools, through our experiences, from our mentors and by common sense will only take us so far. We now have to use every bit of what we know and become true learners who are ready to adapt to whatever comes before us.

Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the arena where I spend my life: the church. We too—maybe even more so than other entities—have entered uncharted territory. Just as Lewis and Clark functioned under a set of geographical assumptions, leaders of the church in the West today have been operating under a set of philosophical, theological and ecclesiological assumptions.

Like Meriwether Lewis sitting on the crest of Lemhi Pass and looking at a landscape he couldn't have imagined, Christian leaders today are sitting in

meetings, reading reports and conversing with colleagues about a brutal truth: *All that we have assumed about leading Christian organizations, all that we have been trained for, is out of date.* We have left the map, we are in uncharted territory, and it is different than we expected. We are experienced river rafters who must learn to be mountaineers. And some of us face “the most terrible mountain we have ever beheld.”

HOW DO WE KEEP OUR CHURCHES FROM DYING?

The question was asked not once or twice, but in one form or another by over fifty people gathered in the room that day. I had just finished three presentations to a group of Methodist Christian educators and pastors in Portland, Maine. Now I was doing an additional workshop to answer questions and engage in further discussion on my topic. My topic had had nothing to do with church growth or congregational renewal. I was talking about Christian community and spiritual formation, sharing about my doctoral research and the necessity of healthy Christian communities for personal, individual spiritual transformation. The audience comprised Christian educators and ministers who were running Sunday schools, leading adult education classes or offering workshops and retreats for personal spiritual growth.

But that’s not what they wanted to talk about.

The statistics of the Western church’s steady decline are well known.⁷ But most of us have been unprepared for how accelerated and disorienting that pace has become through the rapid and demonstrable marginalization of the church in Western society. Most churches (with a few obvious exceptions) are dying.⁸ Extracurricular activities from music lessons to sports participation are considered by most parents to be more effective at forming good character in our children (and getting them accepted to good colleges!) than the church. Spirituality has become wildly popular but so deeply individualistic that the fastest-growing “religious affiliations” among those under thirty are “none” and “spiritual-not-religious.”⁹ As pastors, we were trained to teach those who come on their own, to care for those who call for help, to lead those who volunteer and to administer the resources of those who willingly give and participate. Now we are called on to minister to a passing parade of people who treat us like we are but one option in their personal salad bar of self-fulfillment. To do so will take a significant shift in thinking about pastoral leadership.

But before we get to that, let's first take a good look at how the world—especially the church world—came to be in this place.

FAREWELL TO CHRISTENDOM

After forty years as a missionary and bishop in India, Lesslie Newbigin retired and returned home to Great Britain in the 1970s. What he found in his beloved homeland was a more difficult mission field than he left behind. He wrote, “England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church.”¹⁰

In that one sentence Newbigin challenged the mental model of how the Christians in the West had seen their hometowns and resident cultures for what is now seventeen hundred years. No matter how many times English men and women sang “God Save the Queen,” no matter how beautiful the Christopher Wren cathedrals, no matter the presence of a state-sponsored church where bishops hold seats in the House of Lords, England—and for that matter most of Europe—had become a “pagan society.” Newbigin foresaw that the West was quickly becoming a mission field, and the church needed to “develop a truly missionary encounter” with their friends and neighbors.

During the last decade of the last century, Darrell Guder and his colleagues in the Gospel and Our Culture Network used the term *missional* to differentiate certain congregations from those that were primarily organized around the maintenance of Christendom culture and faith practices. Missional churches are those that understand “the church as fundamentally and comprehensively defined by its calling and sending, its purpose to serve God’s healing purposes *for* all the world as God’s witnessing people *to* all the world.”¹¹ For Guder the church is sent into the world as the rightful and faithful continuation of Jesus’ own sending by God (“As the Father sent me, so I send you” [John 20:2]) and so each *congregation* is a “witnessing community” to its very locale; each particular congregation has itself a unique and *apostolic* mission to fulfill.

The apostolic mission was not merely the saving of souls and their collecting into communities of the saved. The apostolic strategy, whose message was the event of salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ and whose method was defined by the earthly ministry of Jesus, was the formation of witnessing

communities whose purpose was to continue the witness that brought them into existence.¹²

Christopher Wright has reminded us that the sending of the church as the apostle to the world goes to God's very purposes: "It is not so much that God has a mission for his church in the world, but that God has a church for his mission in the world."¹³ Further, "missions" is no longer one of a number of activities requiring patronage and participation that a church provides to Christian constituents (alongside worship, education, care, hospitality and outreach), but in the words of Alan Hirsch, the mission or "sentness" of a congregation is its "true and authentic organizing principle":

Missional church is a community of God's people that defines itself, and organizes its life around, its real purpose of being an agent of God's mission to the world. In other words, the church's true and authentic organizing principle is mission. When the church is in mission, it is the true church.¹⁴

This missional frame for the church is even more critical when we consider the speed and breadth of change in our world. The rise of the digital age, the default emphasis on individualism and the shifts in media, philosophy, science and religion¹⁵ have all led to the now widespread agreement that we are amidst an epochal change.¹⁶ There is certainly a call for the church to recapture a robust apostolic calling and the constituent practices needed for missional congregations. Fortunately, this early discussion and observation has given rise to such a wealth of resources exploring the specific practices of the missional church that I have no need to go into them here. But chief among the topics is the acknowledgment that leadership—and especially leadership development—must be dramatically different than it was during Christendom. Seminaries that produced pastors to be the resident expert in biblical studies, theology and church history; the resident professional for teaching, counseling and pastoral care; and the local manager of the church business and bureaucracy are reconsidering both the demands of the current curricular expectations and the challenges of the changing world around us.

Darrell Guder observes,

If, like Lesslie Newbigin, we are challenged to recognize that our own context has become, within an astonishingly short time, a post-Christian mission field, posing enormous challenges to the received forms and attitudes of Western

Christendom, then that inward-oriented, church-maintaining approach to theological education will not work. Education for maintenance is not the same thing as education for mission.¹⁷

It is worth pausing to acknowledge that a number of church leaders have embraced this missional reality wholeheartedly. Fortunately, there are experts today who are faithful, courageous, thoughtful and articulate. Seminars abound and seminaries now rightly offer degrees in missional theology and missional leadership. I personally have read widely, benefited greatly and am deeply indebted to them for their work. And like me a number of pastors have signed up for training programs, enrolled in cohort groups, and brought consultants and speakers to their congregations to inspire and exhort. But sadly, so little has really changed. While I am indebted to the missional thinkers of our day, it's become apparent *a missional mind shift alone doesn't lend itself to the capacity building that actually brings change.*

But if we are convinced that a change is necessary, how do we bring it without alienating the whole church? How do we face the losses and fears in our congregations, the opposition and resistance in our leaders, and the anxieties and insecurities in ourselves to truly lead the church through this adventure-or-die moment? How do we develop leaders for mission in this rapidly changing, uncharted-territory world?

A CHURCH WITHOUT EXPERTS

We are in uncharted terrain trying to lead dying churches into a post-Christian culture that now considers the church an optional, out of touch and irrelevant relic of the past. What do you do? If you are like me, indeed, like most people, what you do is default to what you know. *You do again, what you have always done before.*

In the movie *Moneyball*, Brad Pitt plays Billy Beane, the general manager of the Oakland Athletics baseball team. Oakland is a small-market team that doesn't have the revenue to compete with the major-market teams like New York, Los Angeles and Boston. His best players keep leaving to make more money for those teams. His owner can't give him any more money, and now he has to replace three star players. He gathers his staff together to explore what they can do about this problem. What does this highly trained, well-paid, experienced group of expert baseball minds do? They use the same thinking,

the same approach, the same strategy they always use—which is not working.

Steve Yamaguchi, the dean of students at Fuller Theological Seminary, says that when his spiritual director took a flying lesson, he asked the instructor why they use flight simulators so much. The instructor said, “In the moment of crisis, you will not rise to the occasion; you will default to your training.”

That was the problem of Billy Beane’s scouting staff and of most church leaders today. We pastors are well trained. We have lots of education and experience, and have had generations of success. Indeed, most of our congregations are filled with people who were blessed by what *once* worked. And so, we default back to those things.

For most of us in ministry, our defaults that once worked so well are not working, and we become discouraged. So, what do we do? *We talk longer*—we preach more. *We try harder*—we go into our bag of tricks and bring out our best programs.¹⁸ *We give a personal touch*—we hope that caring for stakeholders will inspire them to change.

We preachers are such good talkers. In fact, Morgan Murray, the senior pastor at Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church in California, likes to say, “We Presbyterians are so good at talking about problems that after awhile we think that we have actually done something.”¹⁹ And when we roll up our sleeves and dedicate ourselves to doing something, we usually do something we have already done before. We hope and pray *this time* it will work. We’ll put in enough effort or preach with enough passion or give it enough of our personal attention that *this time* it will be different. So, when talking longer or trying harder doesn’t work, what next? Mostly, we turn to tricks and tweaks. We use PowerPoint or Twitter. We add an electric guitar or an accordion. If we have the money, we buy new stuff.

Congregational systems guru Ed Friedman writes, “When any . . . system is imaginatively gridlocked, it cannot get free simply through more thinking about the problem. Conceptually stuck systems *cannot* be unstuck simply by trying harder.”²⁰ Friedman clarifies the challenge in front of us: We are “imaginatively gridlocked.” We can’t see our way to a new way of being, a new response. We are growing more anxious about the decline of the church and the demise of whole religious structures. We don’t know what to do. So we keep trying harder; we keep trying our old tricks. But, of course, it doesn’t work.

In *Moneyball*, an exasperated Billy Beane looks at his manager and tries to urge him to think differently. “It’s adapt or die!” he says.

Adapt or die.

So what do we do to keep our churches from dying? What kind of adaptation is necessary? And how will we find the solutions if we are “imaginatively grid-locked”? Ed Friedman continues: “Conceptually stuck systems cannot become unstuck simply by trying harder. For a fundamental reorientation to occur, that spirit of adventure which optimizes serendipity and which enables new perceptions beyond the control of our thinking processes must happen first.”²¹

What is needed? “A spirit of adventure,” where there are new, unexpected discoveries (serendipities) and ultimately “new perceptions.” To be sure, this is an adapt-or-die moment. This is a moment when most of our backs are against the wall, and we are unsure if the church will survive to the next generation. *The answer is not to try harder but to start a new adventure:* to look over Lemhi Pass and let the assumptions of the past go. To see not the absence of a water route but the discovery of a new, uncharted land beckoning us forward—yes, in the face of the uncertainties, fears and potential losses—to learn and to be transformed.

What is needed? *An adventure that requires adaptive capacity.*

The tests we face are not technical problems that can be solved with current understanding but adaptive challenges that are more systemic in nature. They are part of the very context and culture of the congregation and the changing world around it. They are usually expressed in the conflict of competing values within the church itself.

Adaptive challenges are never solved through a quick fix. If talking, trying or tricks work, they would have worked already. They are only going to be solved through new *insight* into the context, the values and the systemic issues at play in the congregation and within the leaders themselves. In other words, before we can *solve* any problem, we need to learn to *see* new possibilities. And, ironically, because the solution will be an adaptation of the core values, identity and theology of the congregation itself, seeing those possibilities depends on first seeing ourselves and our congregations as we really are.

Once we understand that, perhaps the most terrifying task of leadership begins. It is an enormous risk that requires the nerve to stand in front of a group of people and say out loud three words: *I don’t know*. Literally, “I don’t

know what to do, and maybe, just maybe, *no one* knows what to do.” We need to clearly *see* that what we know to do doesn’t work. We need to have the clear-eyed humility to take an honest assessment and recognize that this challenge is beyond our talking, trying or bag of pastoral tricks.

REORIENTATION

If you can adapt and adventure, you can thrive. But you must let go, learn as you go and keep going no matter what.

Eventually we will start a discipline of looking at our problems differently, acknowledging each time anew that this is not a situation that calls for a new tweak or new technique; this is an opportunity for adventure, exploration and transformation. This is a

moment when our congregation can take on new life, begin a new season of faithful expression. We can start imagining different possibilities. And we can learn new ways of leading.

BACK TO THE PASS

As he stepped off the map into uncharted territory, Meriwether Lewis discovered that what was in front of him was nothing like what was behind him, and that what had brought him to this point in the journey would take him no farther. Lewis faced a daunting decision: What would he do now? Lewis and Clark and their Corps of Discovery were looking for a water route, but now they had run out of water. *How do you canoe over mountains?*

You don’t. If you want to continue forward, you change. You adapt. Meriwether Lewis looked at the miles and miles of snow-covered peaks and knew that to continue his journey he would have to change his entire approach. The same is true for all who are called to lead beyond the boundaries of what is known. We go through a personal transformation of identity and mission intention. We go from being river rats to mountain climbers. We keep on course with the same goal, but change absolutely everything required to make it through this uncharted territory. We ditch the canoes, ask for help, find horses and cross the mountains. And when the time comes, we make new boats out of burnt trees.

You let go, you learn as you go and you keep going, no matter what.

Ultimately, this book is about the kind of leadership necessary for the local church to take the Christian mission into the uncharted territory of a post-

Christendom world. It is about the kind of leadership needed when the world has so dramatically changed that we really don't know what to do next. This is the leadership moment of the church today. We are canoers who have run out of water. There is no route in front of us, no map, no quick fix or easy answer.

But . . . this is good news.

This is a divine moment. This is an opportunity to express even more clearly what it means to follow and serve the God who is King of the entire world. The church at its best has always been a Corps of Discovery. It has always been a small band of people willingly heading into uncharted territory with a mission worthy of our utmost dedication.

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