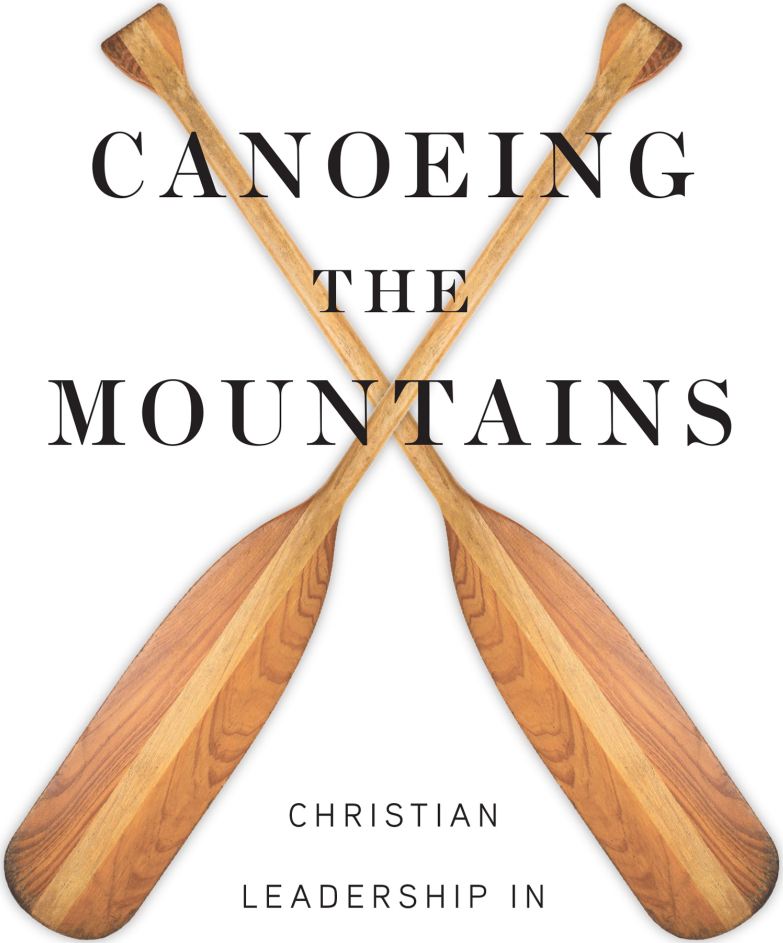


*TOD BOLSINGER*

EXPANDED EDITION



CANOEING  
THE  
MOUNTAINS

CHRISTIAN  
LEADERSHIP IN  
UNCHARTED TERRITORY



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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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*.<sup>3</sup>

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?"<sup>4</sup>
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 such as 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.”<sup>5</sup>

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.”<sup>6</sup> 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,

“Today, 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."<sup>7</sup>

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*."<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup>

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.”<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.”)<sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup>

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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