Notes on “Canoeing the Mountains”

“Leadership is energizing a community of people toward their own transformation, in order to accomplish a shared mission in the face of a changing world.”
—Tod Bolsinger

Part 1: Understanding Uncharted Territory

Chapter 1: Seminary Didn’t Prepare Me for This.

“Christendom” is a term being widely used to describe the 1700-year period between the council of Nicea in 325 AD and the mid-twentieth century. This was a period during which the Christian faith enjoyed a privileged place at the center of Western culture. As recently as the 1950’s, the Lord’s Prayer was recited in public schools, “blue” laws were common, national publications like the Los Angeles Times were offering daily bible verses for their readers, and regular church attendance was a widespread expectation.

This Christendom period has decisively ended. Our current culture provides little support for religious practice, and many outside the church are openly hostile to the practices of faith. As a result, traditional churches are declining across denominations and across the country. Recent statistics suggest a net loss of roughly 4000 churches per year in the U.S., and some 1500 pastors are leaving the ministry every month.

Membership declines have wreaked havoc in many churches. Congregations find themselves stuck in decline, clinging to the past, lurching from one quick fix to another and, frequently, blaming their pastors. The old pastoral “toolbox” of preaching, teaching and pastoral care is proving inadequate to address the current challenges. Many clergy feel their seminary training has not well prepared them for the demands they are trying to address.

“Today’s leaders are facing complex challenges that have no clear-cut solutions. These challenges are more systemic in nature and require broad, wide-spread 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.’”

Chapter 2: Adventure or Die

Using the story of Lewis and Clark as a metaphor, Bolsinger writes about the disorientation that came when the “Corps of Discovery” found themselves facing the “uncharted territory” of the Rocky Mountains. What they had been trained for and expecting had to be cast aside in order to deal with their new reality.
Similarly, churches find themselves facing their own unexplored territory: the end of a time of relative stability and the beginning of a period that is sometimes called “VUCA” (in which things are Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous). We find ourselves called 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.”

Under these circumstances, our calling is to return to an understanding of ourselves as a “Missional Church:” a church that is fundamentally defined by its mission to serve God’s healing purposes for all the world.

Chapter 3: A Leadership Model for Uncharted Territory

Congregational leadership in a post-Christendom world is about transforming a congregation so they may fulfill their collective mission. Whereas in the past we have mostly faced “Technical Problems,” we now find ourselves facing “Adaptive Challenges.” Technical problems are those for which solutions can be found within our existing set of skills. Adaptive challenges require a shift in values, expectations, attitudes and/or habits of behavior. True change comes not as a result of past solutions but will be seen in the changed behavior of those who embrace the church’s mission. A model for transformational change looks at what happens in the intersection of Adaptive Capacity, Technical Competence and Relational Congruence; terms which are explained below.

Part 2: The On-the-Map Skill Set

Chapter 4: Competence and Credibility

The ability to adapt to the changing circumstances of the post-Christendom world requires creating an Adaptive Capacity within a congregation. This is a matter of building trust by demonstrating Technical Competence around the day to day challenges of surviving and thriving. It demands competent church leaders who are able to faithfully steward the church through the “known territory” of honoring “scriptures and traditions, souls and communities, teams and tasks.” Only when a congregation is confident that its leaders can manage the known, will they be willing to be led into the unknown.

5. Preparing for the Unknown

“The primary way to prepare for the unknown is to attend to the quality of our relationships, to how well we know and trust one another.” Relational Congruence is “the ability to cultivate strong, healthy, caring relationships; maintaining healthy boundaries; and communicating clear expectations, all while staying focused on the mission.” The church must be “bound together” through the uncomfortable process of change. If trust is lost, the journey is over.

6. Eating Strategy for Breakfast
The most critical attribute in transformation is a healthy organizational culture. The culture, or DNA, of a church is what we make of the world. It is the combination of the language we live in, the artifacts we use, the rituals we engage in, our approach to ethics, the institutions we are a part of and the narratives we inhabit that have the power to shape our lives profoundly. Our culture is not the values we aspire to, but our actual values, which are expressed in our actual behaviors. The primary work of leadership is clarifying and reinforcing shared values, but it requires that the whole congregation voluntarily embrace those shared values.

Part 3: Leading Off the Map

Chapter 7: Navigating the “Geography of Reality”

Adaptive leadership is about (1) letting go, (2) learning as we go, and (3) keeping going. To be successful, it requires developing “Adaptive Capacity,” which is the capacity of the congregation “to engage in problem-defining and problem-solving work in the midst of adaptive pressures and the resulting disequilibrium.” This work requires a new skill set:

1. The ability to calmly face the unknown.
2. To refuse quick fixes.
3. To engage others in the learning process.
4. To seek new perspectives.
5. To ask questions that reveal competing values.
6. To raise up deeper issues at work in the community.
7. To explore and confront resistance and sabotage.
8. To learn and change without sacrificing personal or organizational fidelity.
9. To stay connected relationally.
10. To help the congregation make hard, often painful decisions to effectively fulfill their mission in a changing context.

Disorientation and resistance are an expected and normal part of this process. We tend to cling to old assumptions as long as possible. But discovering our core ideology and mission can be an exciting and energizing process as well. Bolsinger advises beginning with these questions:

1. Why do we exist as a congregation?
2. What would be lost in our community if we ceased to be?
3. What purposes and principles must we protect as central to our identity?
4. What are we willing to let go of so our mission will continue?

“For church leaders facing this missional moment, the reframing of church strategy from a sanctuary-centered, membership-based, religious- and life-service provider to a local mission outpost for furthering the kingdom of God enables our congregations to discover a faithful expression of our corporate identity in a changing world.”
Chapter 8: My Italian Grandfather Was Killing Me

“When we are experimenting with new solutions within a living system, we are doing so with something that has a history, is alive and precious, and must be handled with care.”

In Christendom, vision was the ability to see future possibilities. In uncharted territory, vision is more about accurately seeing ourselves and defining reality in the present. The church is a living human organism that must be led as a living system. Every living system has its own “DNA.” In the case of the church, our DNA is our defining essence or code. It consists of our core values, essential theology, defining strategy and mission priorities. When our members, relationships and mission are all aligned, the church functions well.

Our code is like a magnet that attracts people who resonate with it and does not attract people who don’t. Understanding our code makes it possible to fine-tune our efforts to realize our mission without violating our own DNA. In responding to post-Christendom challenges, “the questions and potential solutions are always systemic issues that require the body to adapt in ways that are consistent with our DNA.” Good DNA questions include: What is essential? What can be discarded? What needs to be created?

Chapter 9: Don’t Just Do Something, Stand There . . . Then Do Something

“When what you are doing isn’t working, there are two things you cannot do: (1) Do what you have already done, (2) Do nothing. . . . We have to deliberately resist our default reaction to repeat what we have already done, expecting a different outcome (the oft-quoted definition of insanity.)

Our tendency to look for quick fixes, while understandable, does not get at the real problems of post-Christendom. In order to get outside the usual box of finding technical solutions for adaptive challenges, we need an intentional process that includes Observations, Interpretations and Interventions. First, we observe patterns and events of our church life. Then, we interpret these patterns and events, developing multiple hypotheses about what is really going on. Then, we develop interventions that rise from these observations and interpretations. A successful intervention will always be a healthy adaptation of the church’s essential DNA, and it will always be resisted.

Chapter 10: The Mission Trumps!

“Our system is perfectly designed to get the results you are getting.”

“Leadership is disappointing your own people at a rate they can absorb.”

Experimental innovations are the key to surviving in a changing world. But transformational leadership is always a two-front battle: the change itself, and the inevitable resistance to the
change. Weathering these battles requires a clear mission that “trumps” whatever resistance arises.

One way of developing a clear mission is suggested by “The Hedgehog Concept,” which asks these questions:

1. What are we passionate about?
2. What do we have the potential to do better than anyone else?
3. What will pay the bills?

In a healthy Christian ministry, the mission wins every argument. The Leaders must be committed to the mission even when no one else is, and they begin whether anyone is following or not.

Chapter 11: Take a Good Look into the Coffin

The real challenge of leadership is emotional; being able to have command of one’s own anxiety and reactivity in the midst of the emotions that change brings to the surface. Leaders must be able to communicate a sense of urgency, without becoming overwhelmed by anxiety. They must manage “the heat of urgency;” neither escaping the heat or adding fuel to the fire.

Part 4: Relationships and Resistance

Chapter 12: Gus and Hal Go to Church

No ministry leader can carry the burden of leadership alone. For successful transformation to happen, leaders must think strategically about the natural constituencies within the church:

1. Allies: who are all about furthering the mission.
2. Confidants: our friends and families. Usually people outside the church community.
3. Opponents: stakeholders with different perspectives.
5. Casualties: those who experience the losses of change most personally.

Additionally, there must be a group of people charged with maintaining the ongoing life of the church, and another group that acts as the transformation team.

Chapter 13: Et Tu, Church

Sabotage is not something to be avoided or wished away. It is to be expected. It comes with the territory of leading. Saboteurs are usually simply people supporting the status quo. Change cannot be considered successful until after the sabotage has been weathered.
Sabotage should be embraced as a normal part of organizational life and not taken personally. A strategy for dealing with sabotage involves distinguishing between “Red Zone” and “Blue Zone” issues. The Red Zone anxious and over reactive. It is “all about me.” The Blue Zone is “all about the mission.” Good Blue Zone questions are:

1. What furthers the mission?
2. What principles are at stake here?
3. What values are we expressing?
4. What pain must we endure?
5. How will we support those who are experiencing loss?

**Part 5: Transformation**

Chapter 14: How a Nursing Mother Saved America

In the Lewis and Clark expedition, Sacagawea played the role of the outsider who was at home in the unfamiliar territory. Those without power and privilege in Christendom are at home in uncharted territory of the post-Christendom world. The future we are seeking is already happening out on the margins of society, which makes those who have been marginalized a potential source of untapped wisdom. There is a real need for more voices in the conversation we are trying to have.

Chapter 15: The End of Our Exploring

Discovery and exploration do not answer all our questions, so much as they help us to raise and consider new questions. Churches that are “imaginatively gridlocked” search for new answers to old questions, rather than reframing the questions themselves. Reframing the questions opens up the possibility of seeing the challenges in a different way.

1. Is the church really in decline?
2. Does dwindling church attendance mean that people are less interested in God?
3. Is the lack of cultural support for Christianity a threat or an opportunity?

Our focus needs to be on our own transformation together, not on the possibility of our church dying. We need to focus on the mountains ahead, not the rivers behind. We need to focus on continually learning, not what we have already mastered.

**Epilogue: Taking the Hill with Grandma**

The most demanding aspect of being a Christian leader is the complexity of it all.

“None of us in church leadership get the luxury of a single-focused call, no matter how important we think it is. None of us get to handpick our own Corps of Discovery with nothing but the best, bravest, faithful, loyal and mature. Every church and Christian
organization I know is filled with people of varying degrees of competence, courage and capacity to embrace change. As leaders, our calling is to further the mission of the kingdom of heaven, to expand the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel, with the very people whom God has given us.”

A Reorientation Recap:

• We were trained for a world that is disappearing.
• If we can adapt and adventure, we can thrive.
• But we must let go, learn as we go and keep going no matter what.
• In a Christendom world, speaking was leading.
• In a post-Christendom world, leading is multidimensional: apostolic, relational and adaptive.
• Before people will follow us off the map, gain the credibility that comes from demonstrating competence on the map.
• In uncharted territory, trust is as essential as the air we breathe.
• If trust is lost, the journey is over.
• When our old maps fail us, something within us dies.
• Replacing our paradigms is both deeply painful and absolutely critical.
• In a Christendom world, vision was seeing possibilities ahead and communicating excitement.
• In uncharted territory, vision is accurately seeing ourselves and defining reality.
• Leadership in the past meant coming up with solutions.
• Today leadership is learning how to ask new questions we have been too scared, too busy or too proud to ask.
• There is no greater gift that leadership can give a group of people on a mission than to have the clearest, most defined mission possible.
• When dealing with managing the present, win-win solutions are the goal.
• But when leading adaptive change, win-win is usually lose-lose.
• In uncharted territory visionary leadership is more likely going to come from a small Corps of Discovery while the board manages the ongoing health of the organization.
• In uncharted territory, where changes occur so rapidly, leaders cannot assume success until after they have weathered the sabotage that naturally follows.
• Those who had neither power nor privilege in the Christendom world are the trustworthy guides and necessary leaders when we go off the map.
• Those without power or privilege are not going into uncharted territory. They are at home.
• Exploration teaches us to see the familiar through a new frame and demands that we become our best selves.
• Uncharted leadership is absolutely dependent on the leader’s own ongoing exploration, learning and transformation.