

Canoeing the Mountains
Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory

Tod Bolsinger
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“*How do you canoe over mountains?*” asks Tod Bolsinger. “You don’t. If you want to continue forward, you change” (34). *Canoeing the Mountains* 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” (34, 35).

Tod Bolsinger is a vice president for vocation and formation at Fuller Theological Seminary, and teaches practical theology there. He is an ordained Presbyterian minister, and has served as the senior pastor of San Clemente Presbyterian Church, and the associate pastor of discipleship and spiritual formation at First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood.

Bolsinger uses the experience of Lewis and Clark, and their expedition to find the Northwest Passage, as a metaphor to describe how leaders in the Christian Church must move it forward in a culture that is radically different than what they were trained for. Lewis and Clark were expecting to portage from the Missouri River to a western-flowing river that would take them to the Pacific coast of North America. But after navigating the length of the Missouri, when the expedition reached the top of the Lemhi Pass, they were totally unprepared for what they saw. Instead of the land gently sloping toward the Pacific, the Rocky Mountains loomed before them, and extended farther than they could see. And they were not trained nor equipped for this part of the journey. Immediately Lewis and Clark had to change their whole approach to the task ahead. They had to trade canoes and paddles for horses to ride through the mountains. “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” (27).

Likewise, Christian leaders in the 21st century have to change plans, give up expectations, and reframe the mission. “What is before us and what will give us success is totally different than what is behind us.” This demands a radical shift in how we conceive of ministry today.

“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” (28). Bolsinger writes his book to help Christian leaders make that shift.

As with most books on leadership, Bolsinger offers his own definition of leadership. “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” (36). He also describes how the focus of leadership has changed from speaking in the Christendom world to a multi-dimensional approach that is apostolic, relational, and adaptive (37).

To thrive in the post Christendom world, leaders must “learn to let go, learn as we go and keep on going no matter what” (14). Because we are in uncharted territory, we do not know what will succeed in the future. So constant learning, adaption, and innovation are vital to success. To accomplish this, Bolsinger unpacks five lessons for the leaders of churches and Christian organizations. These are (14, 15):

1. “The world in front of you is nothing like the world behind you.” Your past training and experience will not bring success going forward.
2. “No one is going to follow you off the map unless they trust you on the map.” So leaders must be effective in the congregation before initiating the change process, so that the members will have confidence in them during the change experience.
3. “In uncharted territory, adaption is everything.” Adaptive leadership, systems thinking, the priority of mission, and the “central leadership practice for uncharted territory: start with conviction, stay calm, stay connected and stay the course,” are all essential for success.
4. “You can’t go alone, but you haven’t succeeded until you’ve survived the sabotage.” Team leadership is vital, but be prepared for the undermining you will experience from these partners when the losses are keen. To successfully navigate adaptive change in the organization, Christian leaders must learn to stay calm as the church suffers loss; all change involves loss as well as gain. Old programs lose funding or volunteers, or may be discontinued. The leader must help the group grieve these losses, while staying calm.
5. “Everybody will be changed (especially the leader).” Lifelong learning and growth must be part of the leader’s ongoing experience.

Bolsinger develops a model which outlines three main components of transformational leadership: technical competency, adaptive capacity, and relational congruence. The last is defined as “a leader’s ability to be the same person in every setting, every relationship, every task” (44). Some might see this as integrity. The model is designed to guide the leader and focus his or her practice of leadership to be effective in the new reality.

Those who are familiar with the field of leadership studies will recognize that Bolsinger has drawn many of his ideas and concepts from Ronald Heifetz, Marty Linsky, Ed Friedman, Partick Lencioni, John Kotter, and Jim Collins (as the author acknowledges). He does a good job of building a synthesis of these various ideas into a consistent approach for practicing leadership in the church setting. His model is theory based, and confirmed by experience.

Canoeing the Mountains is a very helpful book that combines the thinking of a number of authors into a simple model of leadership that can guide Christian leaders as they seek to help the

Christian Church move forward in a radically different and constantly changing social and cultural milieu. Boslinger has made a real contribution in taking leadership theory and translating it for application in real life settings, by leaders who are called to impact a world that is dynamic and fluid.