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# Leading in Disorienting Times

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Navigating Church  
& Organizational Change

Gary V. Nelson and Peter M. Dickens



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# 1

## Re-Imagining Leadership

*We are entering, in short, a revolutionary age. And we are doing so with ideas, leaders, and institutions that are better suited for a world now several centuries behind us.*

□ JOSHUA COOPER RAMO, *THE AGE OF THE UNTHINKABLE*

□ Virtually everything our modern culture believes about the type of leadership required to transform our institutions is wrong. It is also dangerous. □ This is what Jim Collins, the organizational management guru, believes. We think he may be right. After all, we have been hoarding leadership books for years and usually have one or two of them lying on our bedside tables for future reading. We are, however, practitioners, and sometimes, after we have read a book on leadership, we wonder if some of these writers have ever led a congregation or an organization; if they have ever worked out their theories in a context other than the one about which they have written. Theories are great, but the reality is that they have to be lived out in the hothouse of real people working to accomplish the mission their organizations exist to fulfill.

That is why we decided to write this book. We have lived out a sense of call to leadership in a variety of settings. In each we have been tested, and the various theories we attempted to implement have been challenged. Each time we have learned to

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rely on some key ideas and themes. We propose that leadership is not as complicated as the books have made it; nor is it as simple as implementing a few magic steps. Like the threads woven together in a tapestry, we have been able to identify a collection of themes that resonate as true and practical within the leadership challenges we each have been given.

### **Peter's Background**

Twenty years ago, Peter was faced with a challenge. After several years in increasingly senior management roles being in charge of large divisions and holding enormous responsibilities, he decided to strike out on his own and develop a consultancy that would focus on strategic planning and developing the leadership capacity needed to drive those plans. As he moved away from senior leadership, Peter closely held several lessons he had learned, one of which was that he came to know that good plans are focused on a clearly defined goal or goals and an articulated detailed implementation plan to attain them.

He began his consultancy by coming alongside clients to help them develop what became highly prescriptive plans. They could have been sold by the pound because their value was their weight, not their clarity. However, Peter did not settle there. After the plans had been developed, he worked to enhance the capacity of the senior organizational leaders who would be tasked to manage the change and keep the organization focused on these "weighty" initiatives.

To his utter surprise and to that of his clients, the plans did not work! Unpredictability had crept in. All the well-crafted goals and objectives seemed to lead to dead-ends or down pointless rabbit trails. Unfortunately, the response was always to go back to the fancy retreat center and do it all over again: another brilliant idea, another similar result.

During this period, Peter and his clients began to realize that their deepest beliefs about organizational success were flawed. They began to sense that the root of the problem was foundational. They had believed, as had thousands before them, that organizations ran like a machine. The leader's job was to plan carefully and manage the flawless execution they had designed. If it did not work, the response was to reengineer the

organization or, worse, just work harder. They tenaciously held to the belief that the problem was not in the plan or even in the implementation. It had to be the people. These conclusions led to embracing management by objectives and enhanced training. After all, Henry Ford is often credited with saying, "All I wanted was their hands and I got the whole damn body." If the plan and execution are not producing results, we need to find a way to motivate people differently.

Peter gradually came to the conclusion that the fatal flaw lay much deeper. The assumptions about effectiveness and the view of people needed to be challenged. People are not machines. They are living, changing, adapting organisms that come together in sometimes unpredictable ways and produce surprising results.

In the meantime, in the larger discussion about organizations and leadership, many of the most respected thinkers began writing about organizations in very different ways. Borrowing from a range of sciences—from quantum math, physics and biology, economics and sociology—they explored this curious area of study called chaos theory. For some, the science sounded murky but the underlying themes and foundational presuppositions were fascinating.

Peter began to imagine a different way of thinking about organizations—not as machines but more like ecosystems of people. This approach would emerge and become framed around the organizational change language that was becoming known as complex adaptive systems. At its beginning was a revolutionary starting point that demanded the challenge of needing to learn new functional skills. At a deeper level, it meant engaging in the hard process of changing foundational beliefs and narratives about virtually everything we have long held to be true. People like Jack Mezirow and others suggest that this kind of learning—what they call transformative learning—begins with a disorienting dilemma. A leader of a mission organization realizes that ease of travel to global destinations challenges the way that mission is perceived and ultimately acted out. A nation once able to sit aloof from the terror and destruction of an African disease, such as Ebola, now realizes that it is no longer isolated and safe.

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Every person, by choice or circumstance, faces the opportunity to disassemble the mental models and assumptions with which one's sense of the world is made. It is never easy, and it demands a critical rethinking of the underpinnings of everything held dear. It allows for the possibility of having been wrong or of having held a misleading or false presupposition. We believe that the current times present leaders with such disorienting dilemmas on a daily basis. Our hope, therefore, is to reorient leaders to a way of thinking that offers possibilities for seeing their roles and tasks in new ways. It is this hope that has prompted the title of our book.

In the midst of all of this learning, Peter received a call from a former client. This client had just been appointed CEO of a suburban hospital that had been created out of the forced merger of two long-established community hospitals. No one in the two hospitals had expected the merger, and few had welcomed it. The government had mandated it, however, and so there was no option. The client invited Peter to be part of this process. Peter was intrigued. His consulting practice was thriving, and he had little interest in a "real job." Still, his friend was quite persuasive coaxing him to at least explore the possibilities.

Years later, this client admitted that his primary memory of Peter was as the "chaos guy." He did not really understand what that meant, but in facing the challenge of this forced merger, he wondered if Peter's radical views on how to transform an organization might work.

Peter was persuaded to join the executive team in the unheard of role of Vice President of Organization Development. His sole responsibility was to help create an innovative and agile culture across the organization that was significantly greater than the sum of its parts. Maybe it was ignorance or arrogance that caused him to leap at the chance, but this would be the largest canvas Peter would ever want in order to paint something significant and dramatic.

He did not really think much about the very clear possibility that his approach would not work. Isn't it fascinating how confident we are when we are younger? Instead, equipped with the nascent lessons learned about complexity theory and its application to organizational change, he joined the team.



Amazingly, the combination of collaborative and creative efforts of a great many people worked. It was not because they had all the right answers from the beginning, but because, in true emergent change style, the organization equipped itself to change quickly. They were able to stop doing the things that were not working well so they could focus on what was. Together, they journeyed in change and transition.

The results were dramatic. Within three years, the hospital was named one of the "Top 100 Employers" and accreditation reports lauded the culture of the organization. Financial and clinical performance, which had always been in the hands of extremely capable people, flourished as they embraced and were encouraged in what they were trying to do with the culture.

### **Gary's Background**

Gary's learning has been shaped from a number of different experiences. His pastoral leadership has taken him from Canada to California and back again, and from staff ministry contexts to lead pastoral roles. For a period of time he served as a founding director of a post-graduate ministry formation program that sought to develop leadership for the changing urban environment in North America and around the world. In those years, he watched as some of the graduates of that program moved into settings that were just not ready for the change that needed to take place. He also began to realize that some organizations are willing to die rather than accept changes that they did not want.

It was also during that time that he realized that he needed to put in practice some of the theories he had been espousing on urban church renewal. The story of his time as senior pastor in a downtown congregation is well documented in the book *Borderland Churches: A Congregation's Introduction to Missional Living*.<sup>2</sup> It was there that he framed a theological and foundational belief about why the church exists and how it can join in the mission of God. This once proud congregation in the center of the city of Edmonton in Alberta, Canada, had been in decline for years. Its aging congregation, however, had a sense of hope that something was in their future. It was an exciting revitalization. He was challenged to rethink leadership and

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change. In fact, it was the challenge of the complexity of urban congregations that excited him the most.

The invitation to lead his denomination's international mission organization took him away from that congregation. This was his next significant leadership role, and it proved equally stretching. Denominations and mission organizations were facing challenges that were part of the shifting world around them. Canadian society has moved quite emphatically toward a post-Christendom framework. Institutional religion was increasingly being marginalized. Local churches were asking insightful questions about the existence of denominations and their mission organizations. Frankly, not all their questions were unfair. Denominations and mission organizations have taken loyalty for granted, and this carelessness brought forth evident dissatisfaction.

The next 10 years were an exciting time of moving a traditional mission delivery organization to a mission facilitation organization. It was a painful change, and it required some radical shifts within the organization. It was here that Gary cut his teeth in nurturing change and leading from the bottom up. This organization needed to become a movement if churches and individuals were going to join them. It has been fun for him to observe the significant next steps the organization has been able to continue to take because of the critical shifts that were made at the beginning of the change process.

After 10 years in his role with the mission organization, Gary has stepped into the leadership of Tyndale University College & Seminary situated in one of the most multicultural cities in the world—Toronto, Canada. Tyndale's rich history of over 120 years is rooted in its ability to meet strategic challenges and societal changes head on. At particular times in history, Tyndale had made geographical moves, reimagined itself institutionally, and now was entering a new season of its life and mission. This new season contained within it a challenge of continuing to develop a 10-year-old initiative toward university status and the move to a new campus, which includes the renovation of a large 60-year-old convent and girls' high school. It also included the 21st-century challenge that all universities and seminaries were facing as post-secondary education undergoes dramatic

challenges brought about by the cultural and technological shifts of our times.

As we articulate our initial direction for the coming pages, Gary is attending a conference of seminary presidents. The dialogue and conversations are a profound illustration of the dilemma in which most leaders find themselves. The language of the need for change is urgent and passionate. Everyone knows that seminary education is facing profound changes, but the need to tenaciously hold on to long-held assumptions and signposts of success are difficult to give up. The dialogue continues in the hope that all we would have to do is a nip and tuck of minor surgery so the once-proud days of the past can be recovered. The nip-and-tuck cosmetic changes would allow these leaders to continue to function as if the seminary exists for the same reasons that it did in the previous century. Just one example is the mistaken idea that seminaries in the 21st century exist to train clergy and leaders for professional Christian service in Christendom frameworks of the past. Increasingly, the seminary that Gary serves is receiving students whose intent for theological training is for equipping them not for professional Christian ministry, but to be more effective people of faith in the work vocation they have been called to in business and other areas.

Even the most polite interventional questioning of these assumptions (Gary is after all a Canadian) is received with passive acknowledgement. Later, over coffee, colleagues from other institutions sidle up to Gary and acknowledge their appreciation that he asked the "elephant in the room" question: Why do seminaries exist in the 21st century? This is the question all of them were thinking. The public meetings continue, however, with the old language and the unquestioned assumptions fueling the conversation. It is difficult, but if leaders cannot question the shared and untouchable assumptions of the past, how will others do so?

As is hopefully evident from the above overview of each of our backgrounds, we are drawing from real experience. Peter's experience has been predominantly in the marketplace of business and hospitals. Gary comes from the vantage point of congregational life, revitalizing old denominational mission

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structures, and now as the head of an educational institution. We are writing at a time where our early experiences are now supported by a much better understanding of the theoretical framework that was foundational to our experience.

### **Disorienting Times**

Every futurist or societal guru you read analyzes the current times as a world that has never been seen before. It is a world characterized by unpredictability and global interconnectedness. These two forces alone create a complexity that defies any attempt to place things in neat and tidy categories. It is a world of constant change in which only the nimble and quick responders appear to be able to thrive.

Open a newspaper or log into an online news feed and you are confronted with familiar themes.

- A company, once the market leader, faces decline and insolvency because their “leading-edge” products and services are now deemed obsolete.
- Countries enter political and social revolutions for change and then watch as those liberating people turn into autocratic power-driven regimes similar to the one they had toppled. This, in turn, leads to another cycle of revolution and destruction.
- Innocuous events are amplified through the power of social media into worldwide crises.
- Politicians paralyze their governments in a stalemate of ideologies while the people they were elected to serve wait desperately for solutions.
- The famous leader of one of America’s largest megachurches admits that one of his core strategies, once trumpeted as the answer to the decline in the church, was instead a great mistake.
- Great churches in the heart of great cities, once vibrant and alive, are now empty shells barely surviving or, worse, boarded up and derelict.
- Boomers wonder if they can ever retire and millennials wonder why the world they are inheriting has lost hope.

A visit to the former headquarters of Kodak in Rochester, New York, tells it all. This once giant of the photography industry is now an empty shell. An inability to anticipate the seismic shifts taking place in society and adjust quickly to the innovations of digital imaging that they themselves invented rendered them insignificant and irrelevant in just a few decades.

Part of the disorientation comes because shifts happen even more quickly in the 21st century. Canadians are well aware of Blackberry, an icon in the mobile phone market. Blackberry, once the mobile industry's sign of creativity and business standard, is now in free-fall simply because leadership in the bravado of confidence and illusion of their own making failed to read the cues and anticipate the change in time to adjust to the markets around them.

Joshua Cooper Ramo calls these disorienting times "the age of the unthinkable." He points out that nations no longer dominate in the ways they used to and new actors emerge seemingly from nowhere, shaking the world's balance and safety. For instance, a small band of terrorists abduct two hundred girls from a school in Nigeria. World powers posture and even devise well-intended but meaningless Internet statements, but fail to make any dent in launching a rescue. They flaunt the impotence of former methodologies from a much simpler time.

Nothing less than a reinvention of how we view and understand our world is required. We must innovate and constantly anticipate the changes around us. Whether it is a public trading company, a thriving business, or a church seeking to engage the surrounding community in new ways, bringing about a reinvention is all about resilience and a willingness to adapt.

If the rapidity of the shifts and turns of an ever-changing world is not your cup of tea, then this will be an increasingly difficult world for you in which to live. As Ramo writes, "Change in our world isn't going to feel like something far away from us." It is all around us and occurs at the same time as we are adjusting to the previous shifts. It will only get faster and our confusion will become more pronounced, especially if we continue to cling to the old assumption that implementing a strategic plan will lead to stability and no more need for change.

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Jean Lipman-Blumen describes the multiple changes taking place in the context that leadership is exercised. Combined with the amplification of rapid technological advances, the ways in which leadership decisions are made has been drastically altered. She states some of the challenges:<sup>5</sup>

- Leaders are confronted with shorter and shorter time frames. Speed and agility are essential.
- Leaders get few second chances. They are pressured to get it right the first time.
- Leaders need new ways of diagnosing and solving labyrinthine problems.
- Leaders have to forge new and innovative solutions because the past solutions no longer work and are irrelevant.
- Leaders need to envision and achieve goals stretching beyond the initial problem—in fact, far beyond their organization’s walls and national borders. They need elevation so they can see the big picture.
- Leaders have to think for the long term, despite pressures to succeed in the short term and uncertainties about the future.
- Leaders face unparalleled ethical dilemmas generated by unimagined circumstantial, relational, and technological opportunities. From Wall Street to the White House, Bay Street to Ottawa, constituents have begun to demand new ethical standards in places where ethics were simply stated as just “being honest.”

In addition to the list of Lipman-Blumen’s leadership challenges, there are several characteristics of these times we wish to highlight.

### *1. Shifts in the Expectations Placed on Leaders*

What we expect and need from leaders is undergoing shifts. In the past, leaders were seen as geniuses with a thousand helpers. They were granted respect, however grudgingly, for the positional authority they held. This is no longer the case. Ethical indiscretions by leaders whose loyalty to the bottom line

was more about their bonuses at the end of the year than the health of the organization has eroded trust over the last decades.

As a result, the people who make up the organization's work force tend to function out of a deep sense of distrust for authority. Employees and even church members in voluntary associational relationship have grown to be suspicious of those who choose to lead. This growing erosion of respect and deference to leaders has joined with a pervasive cynicism in which leaders are targets to be criticized and resisted.

James Hunter writes about this suspicion of leadership. He recognized that many in leadership today feel that they are failing the people they lead. He observes, "Many have long ago recognized that the old ways of leading through command-and-control and barking orders are largely ineffective when working with a diverse workplace — the vast majority of whom do not trust power people."

## *2. Organizational Inertia*

Another characteristic of these disorienting times is a kind of organizational malaise and inertia. Long-term employees or church members who remember the days of life and vibrancy are overwhelmed by the changes around them, and in their frustration, they resist either passively or aggressively. Good people find themselves simply tired of the change that either appears unannounced or is foisted on them. What is striking, however, is how unreasonable and irrational the responding emotions can be.

This is illustrated wonderfully by Gary's mother. Her commitment to the church she and Gary's dad have attended for over 60 years is complete. While the church stands in striking need of renewal, each change or innovation has been critiqued over the years by those who remember the glory years of the 1960s. These changes are just too much for these elderly saints who remained and soldiered on after so many left this downtown congregation. They have seen leaders come promising a new future and then go after experiment and tentative strategic directions proved faulty. To be sure, the remaining congregants have been less than open to change, but years of being asked to

support new initiatives that do not bear fruit takes a toll on your trust. The congregation is just tired of being experimented on; enough is enough. It is no wonder that Gary's mother says, "I know we need to change, but if they could just wait until I am gone, they can then change all they want!"

A clergy friend of Gary's recognizes this kind of resistance in the church that he serves. The church is located in one of the fastest-changing neighborhood communities in the city of Toronto. Once a highly concentrated white, Anglo Saxon community, the area has morphed into one of the most highly multicultural neighborhoods in the city. Surrounding schools send out notices to parents in numerous languages. The area is a mosaic of cultures supported by commerce geared to each culture group. Some of the freshest condiments and spices outside of India can be found in this neighborhood.

The impact on the life of the church has been enormous. The pastor describes the church as a wonderfully diverse place of over 90 ethnic groups that have brought life and vitality to the congregation. It has also brought conflict. He recounts one old-time parishioner's resistance when he complained about the influx of immigrants by saying, "First they stole our city and now they have stolen my church."

### *3. Filling the Ego Void*

Another trend that deeply concerns us is what appears to be a growing personal neediness of some leaders. Self-referential leaders, whose need for success or effectiveness is driven by ego or the need for affirmation, can create chaos for organizations. Clergy leaders increasingly find themselves trapped in this theme. In a society that increasingly marginalizes the church, the minister's role becomes even more irrelevant and misunderstood outside the walls of the church building. The result is the desire to find affirmation in the last places where clergy still hold some place of significance and influence – the institutions of church and denominational life.

The growing marginalization of the occupation of minister and its accompanying sense of social irrelevance were clearly illustrated to Gary a few years ago. Having arrived late to the



hospital, he rushed into the waiting area of the operating room where one of the members of his congregation was about to have surgery. Confronted by the head nurse who informed him that he was not allowed to enter, Gary blurted out a plea of significance. "I am here to pray for Jeanne. I promised that I would pray with her before she went into surgery. I am her pastor."

"Where is your hospital badge?" she asked. Sheepishly, he admitted that he had not obtained a badge but would be doing so really soon. She then asked, "Do you have a business card?" Again, with great embarrassment, Gary admitted that he did not have a business card with him. It was then she informed him that he would not be able to enter.

In his need to see Jeanne and to pray with her, Gary pleaded with one last petition. "Look," he said, "being the pastor of First Baptist Church is probably the least relevant and socially significant occupation in this city. Would I tell you I was its pastor if I wasn't?" Gary saw her pause for a moment, and then with a smile and a nod, she allowed him to enter. Gary remembers this with both sadness and relief: relief that he got to pray with Jeanne but sadness that even this head nurse knew the irrelevancy of his profession in a changing society.

We are in a time in which we must ask what happens to the organization when it is being used to fulfill the ego needs of the leader. We also must ask why many leaders are so hollow and empty that they turn to the organization they are leading to fill that void. It is critical to consider the effect on both the leader and the church or organization of this mutual and unhealthy dependency.

Attempting to find affirmation in the jobs we have or the roles we play, relevant or not, is unhealthy. Doing so often leads to an increasing unawareness of ourselves, and this disconnects us from how others perceive us.

Brian Craig is a friend and colleague of Gary's who holds the leadership development portfolio for his denomination.<sup>7</sup> He is often in conversation with pastoral leaders who self-describe as having a particular personality or skill set that, to Brian, does not seem to match the realities of who they really are.

His engagement with these pastoral leaders who are living this disconnect makes him want to ask, "Have you met yourself?" Brian offers this explanation of his startling question:

The starting point is **self-awareness**. How can I lead based on who I am, if I haven't taken the energy and time to know who I am? If we haven't truly met ourselves, the way we lead will be inauthentic, the worst leadership possible in our day. Tim Keel, in *Intuitive Leadership*, writes, "To give the gift of oneself, of authenticity amid a world consumed by facade, is a necessity and a demonstration of the nature of the God revealed in Jesus Christ. If hypocrisy is the cardinal sin in a postmodern context, then authenticity is the cardinal virtue."<sup>8</sup> Reggie McNeal, in *Practicing Greatness: 7 Disciplines of Extraordinary Spiritual Leaders*, places self-awareness as the first of seven disciplines for effective leading.<sup>9</sup>

So meet yourself. Know how you work. Know how you relate to people. Know the strengths you bring to any situation in which you find yourself. Know what stirs your heart, and as a result, what you can stir in others. Some of "meeting yourself" is about knowing the gaps and struggles, too. But don't let that be the focus. Your greatest leading comes by leaning into your God-given abilities, talents, and aspirations. Meet yourself in the pain of failures so that you meet the strength you've been given to rise beyond that failure. Take up the raw material of your gifts and abilities and lead in that manner. Lead from who you are, not as someone you wish you were or as the person a board or consistory might ask you to be. Meet yourself, and lead that way.

#### *4. Lacking Certain Skills*

One aspect of the times that make them so disorienting is that everything is up for grabs. Matters of morality, values, and spirituality are a buffet of choices where you can take what you like and leave what does not feel good. Choice has become the order of the day. Having choice is wonderful as long as we have the tools to navigate and negotiate those choices with

confidence. The problem is that typical academic preparation has not given us the required leadership skill set of navigating and negotiating.

Today's options are so endless that they almost paralyze us. How do I choose? How do I live with others who have not chosen similarly? Combine this reality with the social norm of tolerance that says that no one has the right to tell anyone else what is right or what to do with their lives, and it is no wonder we feel inert. We are discovering that tolerance is not unending or without intolerance.

We as individuals are plugged into multiple technological devices that demand instant responses, and we suffer from "continuous partial attention." In addition, the pace of life and the multiplicity of options can easily overwhelm people in our culture. Even in conservative, more traditional communities where people have some background in spiritual truth and still have at least a modicum of respect for authority, activities such as children's sports schedules, work demands, and social events can consume a well-meaning person's time and energy.

### **The Challenges and Possibilities of Disorienting Times**

As inalterable changes were taking place in Europe toward the end of the last century, Vaclav Havel wrote: "Something is on the way out and something else is painfully being born. It is as if something were crumbling, decaying and exhausting itself, while something else, still indistinct, were arising from the rubble. We are in a phase when one age is succeeding another, when everything is possible."<sup>0</sup>

Great possibilities bring great challenges. Peter Senge puts it well:

Poised at the millennium, we confront two critical challenges: how to address deep problems for which hierarchical leadership alone is insufficient and how to harness the intelligence and spirit of people at all levels of an organization to continually build and share knowledge. Our responses may lead us, ironically, to a future based on more ancient "and more natural" ways of organizing: communities of diverse and effective

leaders who empower their organizations to learn with head, heart, and hand.<sup>11</sup>

We consider Senge's observation incredibly hopeful, for the "ancient" ways of organizing are ways that are aligned with kingdom values. The following are just a few.

### **Relationships Are Key**

The need for a leadership style that is essentially and foundationally relational is critical. The base line for understanding the leadership task in the 21st century is the acknowledgment that we live in an intricately woven systemic dependence on relationships for organizational health. We need one another and the abilities we each bring to face the challenges that emerge. Social and relational intelligence are not only new requirements of the times we are in; they are essential for leadership impact.

For years, Margaret Wheatley has studied leadership in the United States. She observes that people are on a quest to find a new way of working together.<sup>12</sup> The rapidity of change and the isolation caused by problems they cannot solve alone are fertile ground for re-envisioning the organization as community and for taking this idea into the church and actually making it a reality. Leaders become the models of how this can happen. They become the relational trendsetters. We have much more to say about this critical leadership characteristic and will do so in later chapters.

### **Respect the Context**

Leaders function in particular contexts. Ignoring the uniqueness of each context is done at the leaders' peril. Usually these contexts are places in which tradition is so intrinsically part of the organization that leading innovation is significantly different and a much longer process than in start-ups or new church development.

We are often asked if an existing organization can actually change or if change requires completely new structures. The answer is a clear maybe—new structures are not always required, and in fact, most leadership is done in organizations that have context and history. There is no doubt that starting from scratch

is faster and allows leaders an opportunity to white board organizational values.

We recognize that educational institutions in general are by nature slow to change and adapt. Outside accrediting bodies bring form and content to much of what needs to take place in the academy, but they are notoriously always in the mode of catching up to the innovation around them. The seminary we serve has been able to innovate curriculum and delivery systems in remarkable ways, allowing the emergence of a new entrepreneurial direction because it is led by skilled leadership. However, the speed at which this innovation can be enacted is stunted by the systems of checks and balances, committees and councils from which decisions must be made. Quick decisions and nimble responses are almost impossible.

One way we moved forward was to place all of the free-standing entrepreneurial centers under one umbrella. It has become an incubator for new ideas. Peter now directs this entity. It is called the Tyndale Open Learning Centre. It is amazing to see which ideas get traction and how quickly responses can be made to declared needs. The potential for innovation and creativity is multiplied when a staff, made up mostly of practitioners, is given the freedom to build from the ground up. Content is given shape. Failure is allowed, and the results have been innovative and energetic.

One branch of the Centre is the Tyndale Intercultural Ministries Centre (TIM Centre). Its intent is to focus on the changing face of a multicultural city. Its programs emerged from a real need within the ethnic communities for ongoing theological learning. Leadership at the TIM Centre, for example, sensed a growing need expressed by diaspora leaders who were beginning new churches in the city. Traditional programs of study were financially inaccessible and not contextually shaped to the needs these leaders were facing. Because of that expressed need, TIM Centre leadership developed a two-year diploma program for pastoral training and missional church leadership in consultation with the leaders of these churches. The results were amazing. Over a hundred graduates have come through the program in the last four years. Recently, over 30 graduates—part of the great migration to Toronto from around

the world celebrated the second graduation from the diploma program. As a result of this and other grassroots initiatives, a trust between intercultural groups throughout the city has been fostered. Larger research universities have contracted with the TIM Centre because they recognize the foundation of trust and care for the community that has developed.

Most of us will not have the luxury or even the opportunity to work from a white board of organizational beginnings. Instead we will find ourselves in organizations and churches desperately in need of change or re-missioning. Leadership will mean leading organizations into a continual process of reinventing themselves so that they will exist in their present dynamically.

The processes of change will take time and require a skill set that enables living in the "not yet" while moving toward the "what can be." New structures will eventually emerge in the existing frames. Quick and radical change only typically emerges when an organization or congregation has come to a place of near death. Still, organizations can find hope.

Particular leaders and styles are best suited for certain situations, but all leaders function within a context in which the role of leadership may be seen and envisioned in very different ways by people within the organization. Gary often says, "Good ministry is good ministry. The only thing that changes is context." We argue the same truth for leadership. Good leadership is good leadership, but it will look profoundly different as it is worked out in different contexts. Leadership in rural Iowa will be profoundly different than in a cosmopolitan urban center such as Toronto.

### **Transformative Learning**

We have already introduced the work of Jack Mezirow. He is a leading thinker in the area of adult learning, and he is the one who refers to "disorienting dilemmas."<sup>3</sup> Writing in the area of transformative learning, a disorienting dilemma occurs when an indicator of the past no longer points toward a predictable direction. These dilemmas are disorienting because the signposts and assumptions that have allowed successful navigation in the past no longer serve us in the ways they did before. In new

realities, the old signposts may be the very things that get in our way.

As recently as the summer of 2014, we saw this acted out at Gordon College. A letter signed by the President of Gordon College, along with a number of other leaders of Christian organizations and sent to U.S. President Obama, created an unimagined furor. It was a clear and simple letter, written out of past assumptions, asking for exemption under the auspices of religious freedom from the new labor laws being implemented at that time. This innocent action played out under historical expectations received an unanticipated backlash.

In response to the letter, the *Boston Globe* published an exposé on Gordon's "Community Standards Statement." The town in which Gordon College has been located for decades immediately rescinded long-held rental agreements with Gordon for some of their buildings. Simultaneously, the accrediting body for universities and colleges in the New England area announced a review of Gordon College's accreditation qualifications. The Gordon College community reeled from the avalanche of reactions, stunned by an unanticipated backlash.

Once again, Ramo accurately describes our current situation. He writes, "In a revolutionary era of surprise and innovation, you need to learn to think and act like a revolutionary. People that don't act that way have a particular name: victims."<sup>4</sup> In times of unthinkable and discontinuous change (a change process that never ends), we need to learn to think transformatively by attending to the disorienting dilemmas. In the next chapters, we will lay out the frameworks and the methods in which transformation and change can take place.

Transformative learning requires a very painful first step – unlearning. Unlearning is the intentional questioning of all of our assumptions and models. This requires a mindset that considers nothing as sacred and everything as up for grabs. It's a mindset willing to admit that the assumptions that drove and shaped the organization to this point may indeed be "wanting" in the present and the future.

This understanding is particularly critical for people fulfilling leadership roles in organizations. Their assumptions drive the organizations. Their assumptions inform their decisions and

frame their strategic directions. If they do not learn to rethink old assumptions as well as stay alert to the emerging shifts and signs, how will the organization be able to do so?

Unchallenged assumptions are often shaped by sentimentality and deep emotion. Some of those assumptions may not be inherently wrong. They simply do not work anymore. They do not reflect the type of responses necessary for the times we are in. Traditions are important, but over time, if unexamined, their significance and impact are weakened. When organizational leaders sentimentally hold to these deep assumptions without examining their meaning, they lose the ability to ask, "Do they work anymore?" The more blatantly apparent it is that the old assumptions are failing and the more deeply held they are for meaning, the more difficult it may be to question them.

Nevertheless, we are convinced that organizations paddling the white water of disorienting times can change and thrive. At the same time, we are conscious that many are still in the search for the magic program that will enable them to keep doing what they have always done before, just better. We realize how difficult it is to question the old assumptions and signposts of effectiveness, but we do not know any other way that really leads to effective and relevant change.

#### **A Note for the Church**

We have a particular concern and a love for the church. We are also her greatest critics. Sometime in our history we lost our moorings around what it means to be the church. It is not the purpose of this book to analyze why this took place. What is more important is to realize that institutionalized and insular views of church life made us unable to engage culture in significant ways. When those cultures and societies began to change, we were impotent to speak into those changes in any meaningful way because we had rendered ourselves irrelevant. Our insularity has been our downfall. Tradition and traditionalism became the entrenchments from which we lived. Tradition is fundamentally different from traditionalism. Jaroslav Pelikan, in *The Vindication of Tradition*, characterized the difference when he wrote, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."



Traditionalism supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time ...."<sup>15</sup>

We failed to challenge these institutionalized and insular Christendom foundations and, as a result, entered into a kind of mission-drift that was more about survival and less about our mission and purpose. We spent most of our time focusing on cosmetic alterations of how we packaged church, tailoring ourselves with more contemporary clothes in the desperate hope that people would find us more attractive. Like many public companies that enter the same journey, we found ourselves in the Kodak-like journey toward irrelevance and decline.

We lost our compass direction and settled too often for pale imitations of what really could be. The challenge was to examine our core beliefs about church and our assumptions, but we did not show up for the discussion. And, to be honest, our leaders neither had the courage nor the skills to lead us in that process. As a result, we find ourselves in a time of great shifts. Shifts that bring implications on what leadership will need to be about in the coming years. From a Canadian perspective, we are simply a time-lapse camera as to where the United States is heading. The shifts we have noticed in our context above the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel include the following:

- **From relative similarity to cultural pluralism.** There was a time where one story gathered and dominated all other stories in Canada. Even though Canada imaged itself as a mosaic of cultures unlike the "melting pot" image in the United States, this multicultural diverse affirmation was still taking place with one dominant voice and influence. This is no longer so. For example, we live in a city, Toronto, where over 49.9 percent of the population is foreign-born. Toronto has become a multicultural reality where the world has come to its neighborhoods. Younger generations are no longer surprised or intimidated by this new situation. What impact does this change have on how we do business? What does church look like in a multicultural context?
- **From church at the core to a decentered church.** European cities are built around town squares that

often have at their heart a church or cathedral. One only has to travel for a short time in Europe to be reminded how de-centered the church really has become in after-Christendom Europe. Too often, the churches in the squares are museums or concert halls and, if they are home to a worshipping community, their buildings come alive only a few times a week. This is a social reality for the Canadian church. In fact, it is really a question about whether religion and the church even have a place at the table.

• **From church as familiar to church as a new social reality.**

In the Canadian context, more and more Canadians have less and less Christian memory. We live in an after-Christendom world that is quickly becoming a new reality in the United States as well. In a way, this shift has become a healthy one as it has witnessed the decline of religious nominalism. Timothy Tennant from Asbury Theological Seminary makes the point that one of the downsides of Christendom was that it fostered religious nominalism—church attendance as a cultural norm but not a life-shaping force in one’s life. As Christendom has declined in Canada, there has been a clear sorting out; less and less people go to church, but more and more know why they are going. This new social reality has put the church in unfamiliar territory, leaving many within the church feeling uncomfortable. We do not know who we are, and those outside the church are not sure who we are either. The implications of this shift are enormous. Within our churches, changes must take place at deeper levels than the cosmetic changes we too often make trying to shape the church to appear more like everything else people’s experience.

We must realize we have lost our way. Our reason for existence in the first place is nearly forgotten. Like a department store chain that after years of tinkering with shelving, lighting, and new product in the attempt to stem the tide of decline, finally asks the question “why?” and not just “how” and “what.”

For the church, it means asking why God formed the church in the first place and for what purpose. The implications that

emerge from the answers to these questions are enormous. Leaders of the church caught in the models of success placed before them are trapped. If they do not examine these models in the light of theological and biblical views of the church, they will become victims of every wind of a new idea and fad. Models are only helpful if rooted in a deep abiding sense of why the church or organization exists in the first place. We believe that place is found in the mission of God and in his passionate purposefulness.

### **Another Book on Leadership**

This book is about leadership in disorienting times. We are writing this book with the deep commitment that this is actually a great time to be in leadership and a great time to be in the church. The fact that everything is up for grabs is something we find exciting. The fact that leadership has become a courageous act in the swirl of constant change means to us that the day belongs to the nimble and the adaptive. We invite each of us to contain our ego-centeredness so that change and creativity can emerge from within and so that leadership can be a shared process. Change is a collective action orchestrated by confident and grounded leaders who believe that more than one individual can influence its process of change.

Almost every leadership book quotes Peter Senge and we are no exception. He writes: "We are coming to believe that leaders are those people who 'walk ahead,' people who are genuinely committed to deep change in themselves and in their organizations. They lead through developing new skills, capabilities, and understandings. And they come from many places within the organization."<sup>6</sup>

Leadership in the 21st century requires a social and relational IQ that stimulates collective action and engenders trust. We want to suggest that disorienting times require disorienting leaders. Focusing on change within any organization—whether it be a congregation, denomination, business, or hospital—we explore the principles that are embodied in leaders so passionate about what they hope to see happen in the world around them that they are willing to lead differently, confidently, and from the bottom up.

# Notes

## Chapter 1: Re-Imagining Leadership

<sup>1</sup>Jim Collins, "The Misguided Mix up of Celebrity and Leadership," Conference Board Annual Report, Annual Feature Essay, [http://www.jimcollins.com/article\\_topics/articles/the-misguided-mixup.html](http://www.jimcollins.com/article_topics/articles/the-misguided-mixup.html).

<sup>2</sup>Gary V. Nelson, *Borderland Churches: A Congregation's Introduction to Missional Living* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup>Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Age of the Unthinkable: Why the New World Disorder Constantly Surprises Us and What We Can Do About It* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 2010).

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>5</sup>Jean Lipman-Blumen, *Connective Leadership: Managing in a Changing World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 6.

<sup>6</sup>James Hunter, *The World's Most Powerful Leadership Principle* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2004), 45.

<sup>7</sup>Brian Craig, Director of Leadership Development, Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec.

<sup>8</sup>Tim Keel, *Intuitive Leadership: Embracing a Paradigm of Narrative, Metaphor, and Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 117.

<sup>9</sup>Reggie McNeal, *Practicing Greatness: 7 Disciplines of Extraordinary Spiritual Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

<sup>10</sup>Vaclav Havel, "The New Measure of Man," *New York Times* (July 8, 1994).

<sup>11</sup>Peter Senge, "Communities of Leaders and Learners," The 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of *Harvard Business Review* (September-October, 1997).

<sup>12</sup>Margaret Wheatley, *Finding our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005), 56.

<sup>13</sup>Jack Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

<sup>14</sup>Ramo, *Age of the Unthinkable*, 11.

<sup>15</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, interview with *U.S. News & World Report*, July 26, 1989. (The interview focused on his book *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986).)

<sup>16</sup>Peter Senge, *Leading Learning Organizations: The Bold, the Powerful, and the Invisible* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 45.