



Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory

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Explorers Lewis and Clark had to adapt. While they had prepared to find a waterway to the Pacific Ocean, instead they found themselves in the Rocky Mountains. You too may feel that you are leading in a cultural context you were not expecting. You may even feel that your training holds you back more often than it carries you along.

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

If you're going to scale the mountains of ministry, you need to leave behind canoes and find new navigational tools. Reading this book will set you on the right course to lead with confidence and courage.

Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory Details

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From Reader Review Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory for online ebook

Byron Fike says

The cultural shifts of the 21st century have caught the church completely flat footed. We know church doesn't work like it used to and many of us are alarmed at the declining numbers we are experiencing and the declining influence churches are having on the culture. Bolsinger has done us all a great service by giving us a book to open a much needed dialogue amongst church leaders. This is not a book of easy answers but thought provoking questions. The easiest summary of the book is that we either adapt or die! This is a guidebook to help us begin the painful process of adaptation that the message of Jesus might not simply survive, but thrive in a future that is radically different from the past.

Joel Wentz says

No one is more surprised than me that a book about "Christian leadership tactics" is getting a five-star review here. Seriously, it's saying something that I loved the book that much, because I typically avoid anything that smacks of "Church, Inc." like the plague. But Tod Bolsinger has broken that mold for me.

First, he writes with a pastor's heart. At no point did I feel like the "institution" trumped the people we are called to minister to. At the same time, though, he has a clear-eyed view on how any healthy institution should function. He manages to thread the needle between the relationally-messy-family-church, and the institution-to-manage-and-run church, and I think he does it brilliantly. Second, he writes with a clear view of the challenges that post-modernity are bringing. This book doesn't "double down" on what has worked before, or simply try to "water down" previous leadership tactics to appeal to Millennials. None of that, thank God (literally). And finally, the use of Lewis and Clark as a driving analogy was extremely helpful. I found myself tracking along with his ideas, and holding on to them, because of the through-line of the Lewis and Clark expedition (and he did his homework on that!).

So, yeah, I actually completely loved this book. Anyone in some sort of church/ministry leadership capacity today absolutely owes it to themselves to pick this up. I will be keeping it in a prominent place on my shelf, and referencing it multiple times in years to come, I'm sure.

Arthur says

At first, I struggled with "Canoeing The Mountains" and at times avoided picking it up and working through an early chapter. It confronted my fears and that was hard to admit. Then it hit me. I struggled with it so much because I was living this book in my ministry and have always insisted my inability to turn every church and project into a success was my lack of technical competence or ability. My default was that I must not be a great pastor or leader. This book gave me some hope and helped me better understand adaptive leadership. There are only a few books that I've underlined more and I would recommend pastors to check this one out if struggling with feelings of inadequacy or being overwhelmed by the task of leading ministry in a context where old tricks don't produce miraculous turn arounds.

Carolyn says

Use of personal examples help to bring understanding and practical application to the theoretical concepts or principles--whichever fits best. The sequencing was logical as it built a foundation of understanding and then circled back around to explain, describe, apply. I liked his adherence to the technical and relational competencies required for adaptive change, but then he added more chapters about allies, opponents, dissenters, and the saboteurs who exist in EVERY context!! Solution: Keep focus (mission trumps) and stay the course. . .

"Two illustrations: 1) We regularly use three words to talk about the people with whom we want to serve--character, chemistry and competency. Bolsinger uses the word capacity instead of competency. That subtle change is huge. It's the power of the right word. We use competency but that implies a set of skills. In our explanation we always say that we can teach what we want. Capacity captures that. 2) We're all familiar with Covey's "win-win" scenario. Bolsinger realistically and convincingly argues that win-win almost always causes us to maintain the status quo. If we are truly going to move people at a pace they can tolerate (paraphrase of his definition of leadership) then someone is going to lose something." Quoted from review by ??

Mark says

Wonderful in-depth look at adaptive leadership in the church context. Approachable and easy to read yet full of leadership insights.

Howard says

Overview of current MBA thinking on "change management" applied to churches. You'll think it's great if you think churches should be run by MBAs as businesses.

Tim Knight says

I wish I could add a few stars to the review. This book was/is exactly what I need. I devoured it in two days. It doesn't sugar coat the reality of in the trenches Ministry in the 21st century; yet at the same time, it points to a way forward. I'm so thankful to have read it (thanks Mark for pushing it on me!). Now I'm got to go over it again and begin to mine its rich wisdom for today.

Chuck says

Thanks to JK Jones for this recommendation. Took me a while to get to it. Wish I had read it earlier. Briefly interacting with the Lewis and Clark story, Bolsinger writes about leadership that actually transforms the organization (read: church, school, non-profit, etc). His principles are powerfully laid out. His insights are helpful and cause a number of light-bulb moments.

Two illustrations: 1) We regularly use three words to talk about the people with whom we want to serve--character, chemistry and competency. Bolsinger uses the word capacity instead of competency. That subtle change is huge. It's the power of the right word. We use competency but that implies a set of skills. In our explanation we always say that we can teach what we want. Capacity captures that. 2) We're all familiar with Covey's "win-win" scenario. Bolsinger realistically and convincingly argues that win-win almost always causes us to maintain the status quo. If we are truly going to move people at a pace they can tolerate (paraphrase of his definition of leadership) then someone is going to lose something.

This is a great read...engaging...challenging...worthwhile.

Bob says

Summary: Using the story of Lewis and Clark, Bolsinger explores the kind of leadership needed in the uncharted territory of our rapidly changing cultural landscape.

"Seminary didn't train me for this." "Our church is dying and I have no clue what to do." Over and over, Tod Bolsinger encountered these statements in his consulting work. Pastors are trained in teaching, liturgics, and pastoral care, and often, those tools just don't seem enough in our changing world. Bolsinger likens this to the moment Lewis and Clark climbed the Lemhi Pass, having canoed up the Missouri River, and instead of expecting to find a river on the other side of the mountain that would carry them to the Pacific, they found...mountains. They needed to exchange canoes for horses, and adapt to an "off the map" situation. In this book, Bolsinger considers the adaptive leadership of Lewis and Clark, and applies it to Christian leaders often tempted to try to "canoe the mountains," because they don't know any other way to lead. Often, they may be the greatest obstacle to transformative change in their churches or organizations. The choice they face is between adventure and organizational death. All of this is part of understanding the "uncharted territory" that calls for a new kind of leadership.

Part Two makes the contention that there are critical "on the map" skills that leaders must demonstrate in order for people to follow them "off the map." These include competence and credibility in stewarding Scripture and tradition, souls and communities, and teams and tasks. It means leadership that develops "relational congruence" in which one builds trust by showing the ability to be the same person with the same values in every relationship. And it means clarity and embodiment of the core values one hopes to see manifest in the church.

"Leading off the Map" is the focus of Part Three and critical to this is the adaptive capacity of the leader. Leaders must be able to look at systems rather than react to symptoms, to calmly face loss and the challenge of the unknown, leading a learning process expressed in asking questions rather than giving answers. Sometimes rather than doing something, it first means standing still...and then doing something through a process of observation, interpretation, and intervention. In the process, understanding the DNA of the church and not violating that is critical. Interventions should start out modestly and playfully--lots of experiments, and resistance can be expected. In facing resistance, leaders must be absolutely clear and convicted about the mission, which for Bolsinger, "trumps all" and ready to press into mission even when no one else is.

Part Four goes deeper into the issue of "Relationships and Resistance." Leaders cultivate relationships with six groups of people:

1. Allies, aligned and in agreement with the mission.
2. Confidants, who are outside the organization and can give honest feedback.

3. Opponents who are not enemies but have a different perspective that must be heard and engaged.
4. Senior authorities, those above one with whom connection and relationship are critical to support one through a change process. Think of Jefferson's role with Lewis and Clark.
5. Casualties, those who stand to lose in a change process for whom leaders assume responsibility.
6. Dissenters who ask the tough questions that need to be asked and responded to without defensiveness because it is not about the leader but the mission.

The real challenge though is recognizing and persisting through sabotage, which Bolsinger believes can be expected when leading in uncharted territory. That was an eye-opener.

Finally, in Part Five, Bolsinger writes about the "transformation" that occurs with adaptive leadership. He observes the leadership transformation in the Lewis and Clark party, where the two share equally in command, where a woman, Sacajawea, leads, where both she and a slave vote, and a soldier is released from regular duty for discovery--long before such practices would be widely accepted in the culture. Bolsinger proposes that just as the most significant blockage may be the leader, so also, the most important transformation to occur in an adaptive leadership process is in the leader.

This seems to me to be a critically important book for leadership teams and pastors. So often our approach when things are not working is simply to double down and try harder, which, as someone has pointed out, is a definition of insanity. The willingness to leave the canoes behind, and learn new skills, to get up on the balcony, and then try new interventions rooted in careful observation and interpretation and not reaction, and to stay relentlessly focused on mission separated Lewis and Clark from other explorers.

I would have liked to see this leadership model rooted in scripture. Lewis and Clark certainly were singular leaders, and the book invokes good leadership theory. I can't help but wonder what one might draw from the leadership of Moses, of David, of Jesus, and of Paul, each who in some sense led in uncharted territory. The conflict situation of Acts 6 strikes me as a marvelous example of a system that wasn't working, and of leadership that exhibited relational, and spiritual competence linked to clear missional focus while adapting to problems associated with expansion, resulting in a transformed, rapidly growing church and an enlarged and diversified leadership nucleus.

Nevertheless, there is much of profit here. If leaders can simply stop and realize they are trying to "canoe the mountains" that is probably worth the price of admission. To move from a speaking to a collaborating ministry that leads, not with answers, but is open to questions and learning is an important leadership transformation. It could make all the difference between catalyzing the giftedness within our organizations and churches, and losing it.

Clint Walker says

Some reviews come quickly, others take forever. That is for different reasons. As far as my interactions with "Canoeing the Mountains" goes, I have been digging into this book since I received it nearly three years ago. My interest was then deepened by my local denominational leadership becoming heavily invested in this text. Then, I went to a 6-7 workshop where the information in this book was presented by Tod Bolsinger. He preached the next day at the same training event. Let me tell you, I think this is really good stuff!

The book is about what is called "adaptive" leadership. It uses the metaphor of the journey of Lewis and

Clark to talk about the task of ministry leadership in the 21st century. The thesis is this: We are called to lead into a frontier that we were neither trained for or equipped to lead in, so we are going to have to learn to lead people in and through "uncharted territory".

While Bolsinger bases his study in his pastoral and institutional leadership experience, he is also strongly grounded in research. First, of course, he is grounded in research about Lewis and Clark. Furthermore, the book draws heavily on the research and writing of Ronald Heifetz. Heifetz advocates that leaders and organizations face challenges with adaptive solutions instead of "technical" fixes. Quick fixes don't work, but coming to terms with your identity and environment, and then adapting who we are to survive and thrive in a changing world offers promise.

In order to lead "off the map", Bolsinger advocates leading "on the map" to build trust and demonstrate competency to those that you are leading. When one demonstrates that they are skilled and competent in doing the expected work of being a pastor, then the pastor can begin the process of leading them forward to a new place. However, if someone has not demonstrated enough competence to the congregation, the congregation will struggle to trust that leader to lead them into a scary and unknown future.

Step by step, Bolsinger offers perspective and guidelines for transformational leadership. He leads readers through a process of adapting, of clarifying vision, and of surviving the sabotage and push back that ultimately comes with any effort of transformational leadership.

I cannot say it enough, this book is excellent, and a necessity for most pastor's libraries. I come back to it over and over again.

I have two copies of this book. The expanded edition has a very thorough and expanded study guide and is in hardback, while my earlier copy is in paperback. I have kept both copies

Drew says

This is perhaps the best book on church leadership I've read. The strength of this book is that it collates so much wisdom from different authors and leaders in one place. Other than the author's anecdotal experience and the framework provided by the narrative of the story of Lewis and Clark, there's not much original in this book. But if you are looking for a one-stop shop on the state of the church and how to navigate the struggles churches face in the twentieth century, this book is at the top of the list.

Ron Blake says

A must read for those seeking to minister in the 21st century. I can't recommend highly enough

Bonnie Wilcox says

An important read for those who know they are called to lead the Church into a new future, where "river rats must become mountain climbers." Good content for leading through adaptive change.

Lynn says

This is a book I would highly recommend for any pastor or elder board in a church with declining numbers. It gives a great example of how Christian churches of today are not in the familiar territory from the early twentieth century. The same solutions will not work for the culture in which we currently live. Bolsinger explains how one might go about adapting to this new territory and lead the church into a more fruitful ministry.

Sagely says

I slipped Bolsinger's *Canoeing the Mountains* into my bag on my way to my denominations biannual ministers' conference. I thought I might have some downtime between sessions.

The conference was led by Susan Beaumont of <http://www.susanbeaumont.com>. She spoke on leadership and adaptive change, drawing heavily from the work of Ronald Heifetz and Edwin Friedman. In a time of congregational anomie, this was useful stuff.

In a break, I wandered to an out of the way corner of the conference center. I pulled CtM out of my bag. My brother-in-law had recommended it. His congregation were working their way through it, and he thought it might help me.

I was shocked when Bolsinger kept name-dropping Heifetz and Friedman. In fact, CtM covered nearly the exact same material Beaumont had sketched for us in our four-hour seminar--but with the added depth of book-length treatment.

I've been favorably impressed. I'm not one for jumping on the latest leadership tips and tricks. But CtM roots much of its advice in missional imaginations of church that feel at home in NT Christianity and our own post-Christendom world.

I also need to admit that the Lewis and Clark co-text touches close to home for me. Growing up in Montana, the Corps of Discovery showed up just about every year in my elementary education. I was nervous that Bolsinger would import a lot of nationalism, Manifest Destiny, tin-eared ignorance of Indigenous-Settler histories. But I think CtM steers wide of much of that (those there are a few moments that raised my eyebrows).

A great book. I've already recommended and loaned out my copy and ordered another one.
