

Tried & True

The Countercultural Virtues
of Christian Leadership



Margaret Diddams
Shirley A. Mullen



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1



Upside Down, Inside Out

John Wesley's Faithful Leadership for a Modern World

In this “refined” way of trusting to my own works and my own righteousness . . . I dragged on heavily, finding no comfort or help therein till the time of my leaving England. On shipboard (enroute to the colony of Georgia), however, I was again active in outward works, where it pleased God of his free mercy to give me twenty-six of the Moravian brethren for companions, who endeavored to show me a more excellent way. But I understood it not at first. I was too learned and too wise, so that it seemed foolishness to me. . . .

In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s “Preface to the Epistle to the Romans.” About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

JOHN WESLEY, FROM HIS JOURNAL RECOUNTING
THE ALDERSGATE EXPERIENCE (1738)



HISTORY CAN SURPRISE US, but only if we stop long enough to listen.

*History can surprise us, but only if we
stop long enough to listen.*

In 1700, England was in the throes of recovering from nearly a century of bitter political and religious turmoil. It was the kind of polarization with which we in twenty-first-century America are all too familiar. In fact, while there are obvious differences, given the three hundred years of intervening history, there are also remarkable similarities between the two eras. For one thing, religion and politics were so intertwined that it was not easy to tell whether religion was shaping the politics of the faith community or political loyalties were driving religion.¹

Given the utter failure of either the Tudor or Stuart monarchs of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England to sustain national unity following Henry VIII's death in 1547—after his dramatic break with the Church of Rome in the 1530s and the establishment of his own national church—the British people had given up on both politics and religion as potential foundations on which to ground a reliable and lasting stability. The Elizabethan Settlement under Henry VIII's daughter Elizabeth I (ruled 1558–1603), which sought to find a middle way between the Puritan leaders of Parliament and the Catholic-leaning Stuart monarchs, ended finally with the execution of Charles I in 1649. Between 1649 and 1661, England endured eleven years of civil war as charismatic Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell attempted to establish parliamentary rule all the while fighting internal forces that wished to maintain the monarchy. After the loss of nearly two hundred thousand citizens during the eleven years of civil war, a number roughly proportionate to the deaths suffered by the English in the First World War, the country was no closer to having settled either the doctrinal or the political debates that divided the country.² It was time to look elsewhere for reliable knowledge on which intelligent and good people could build a sound economy and a peaceful, flourishing society.

¹See Robert Putnam's classic work, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Simon & Schuster, 2012), or Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism* (Harper, 2023), for exploration of this phenomenon in recent American history.

²See Jane H. Ohlmeyer, "English Civil Wars," *Britannica*, November 7, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/event/English-Civil-Wars>.

We might well have expected the 1700s in Britain to be shaped by the rationality of a John Locke or the cautious, pragmatic skepticism of Scottish historian and philosopher David Hume, or the scientific laws derived from the empirical methods of an Isaac Newton. The last thing we would have anticipated was a visitation of “enthusiastic” religion—*enthusiasm* being understood in the eighteenth century as overwrought emotionalism untampered by appropriate reliance on reason.

It was just exactly the emergence of Methodist revivalism that proved to be the more influential movement in shaping eighteenth-century Britain—and that succeeded in building the bridge to a more stable social and political order. It was this movement, associated primarily with the Wesley brothers, John and Charles, and their fellow evangelist George Whitefield, that brought renewed hope to the poor through creating a popular culture of self-help and respectability. Perhaps even more critically, it prepared fertile cultural ground for the renewal of senior leadership in society.

What was it that allowed John Wesley and others in the Methodist movement to gain the sort of leadership traction that led to social and spiritual revival in eighteenth-century England? There were no leadership books for Wesley to consult, nor seminars to attend. Yet somehow, he was able to precipitate and garner influence that would outlast his own leadership.

For John Wesley and his colleagues in the Methodist movement, epistemological authority transcended the Enlightenment binaries of reason/emotion and reason/revelation. They believed in the validity of a wider range of sources through which God might speak to them, including the revelation of Scripture, reason or the processes of rationality, the empirical resources of experience or experiment, and church tradition.³ Wesley’s theology drew deeply on the orthodox tradition, and he worked intentionally to cultivate greater understanding across the Catholic/Protestant divide in English society, especially when the divide was grounded in narrowly rigid and dogmatic thinking.⁴

Wesley’s message transcended the liberal/conservative categories of British society. His message of repentance and empowerment came to individuals but

³It should be noted that this four-pronged framework of legitimate theological authority, purported to capture John Wesley’s approach to knowledge, was first articulated by twentieth-century Methodist scholar Albert Outler and not by Wesley himself.

⁴See especially John Wesley’s sermon *The Catholic Spirit* (Christian Resource Institute, 1771).

called them beyond the standard liberal categories of individual rights, entitlement, and personal agency, focusing instead on the importance of community fellowship, responsibility, and accountability. Furthermore, Wesley's theology transcended the idealist/practical dichotomy or the dualism of this world/next world thinking that was the trademark of the contemporary social movements. Wesley addressed the practical needs of the poor and disenfranchised that fueled the appeal of late eighteenth-century utopian or evolutionary socialists and the later nineteenth-century revolutionary Marxists. Yes, he called attention to the world to come, but in such a way that it flowed back to inspire hopeful change in this world, not making believers complacent about life in this world. It is no accident that wherever the Wesleyan revival went in Britain, North America, and eventually the rest of the world, there were not only churches founded but also hospitals and schools. Finally, there was the Wesleyan focus on culture and learning—especially music and science—but not as a badge of elitism; rather, they were God's gifts for the entire world, as appropriate in the fields and workplaces as in the concert halls and formal halls of learning.

But even more important than the theology and practice of the Wesleyan movement was the focus on the inner life of its adherents—especially the leaders. The Wesleyan movement offered a new vision of leadership, one grounded in the character and spiritual maturity of the leaders themselves. It was not cognitive theological or philosophical doctrines by themselves or even Wesleyan practices that effected the social transformation. It was the spiritual formation of the leaders—including such prominent national leaders as William Wilberforce as well as the multitude of local leaders selected and prepared by Wesley—who mediated the doctrines and practices in their relationships and in their circles of influence. In their hands the tools of Wesleyan teaching became effective means of rebuilding a fractured and polarized British society. Outward social transformation grew out of inner spiritual transformation. The doctrines and practices were not simply taught; they were embodied in the leadership of the movement. It was both the imaginative bridge-building of the movement and its compelling incarnation in the lives of leaders that accounted for the power of the Methodists to transform the polarized society and culture of eighteenth-century Britain.

We need a Wesleyan movement for twenty-first-century America. Specifically, we need a revival of Wesleyan thinking and practice among twenty-first-century leaders—both inside and outside the faith-based community. We need a revival of leadership that goes beyond a focus on training and techniques for maintaining one’s own position or even organizing strategy for meeting organizational goals. We need a Wesleyan vision of leadership grounded in the authentic character and inner formation of the leader, shaped by a unitary theology of surrender, stewardship, and servanthood for the common good, and mediated amid the complexities of practical leadership contexts.

There are certainly leadership books that argue for these notions in the abstract. This book offers a tutorial—exploring these ideas as they were worked out concretely in the life of John Wesley.

The impact of this new cadre of leaders on twenty-first-century America will not look exactly like eighteenth-century Britain. History never repeats itself in this narrow sense. But we hope to make the case that Wesleyan theology and practice offer a vision and the resources to prepare leaders—beginning with their own inner spiritual transformation—who can move us beyond the paralysis of dichotomous thinking that is evident in our public institutions, in the media, in our churches, and in our homes. With Wesley’s help, we can once again use our collective energy to empower the God-given potential of each human being for the common good—and as a creative participant in God’s redemptive purposes for the whole world.

WHY THIS BOOK?

Neither of us ever expected to be writing a book on leadership. As academics in the fields of organizational psychology and history, respectively, our writing has been primarily for our guild. We began our vocational journey in the corporate world and in the classroom. But each of us found ourselves being thrust increasingly into positions of leadership. And as we have already mentioned, each of us found our Wesleyan heritage to be surprisingly relevant in shaping our understanding of leadership. Wesley inspired in us an approach to leadership that was quite different from what we saw modeled around us.

It is a vision of leadership that begins from the inside out, rooted in character, authenticity, and spiritual formation rather than technique. Furthermore,



it is not simply that spiritual maturity is essential for sustainable effectiveness as leaders but that leadership itself can be a source of spiritual formation. We might say, in the tradition of Wesley, that God wants leadership to be a sanctifying context for leaders themselves.

We felt compelled to articulate for aspiring leaders a distinctively Wesleyan approach to leadership, believing this would benefit these leaders, the organizations they lead, individuals within these organizations, and ultimately the larger culture. We believe that if more leaders would take Wesley seriously, we would have stronger and more flourishing organizations, more energized individuals working within these organizations, and more accomplishment of institutional mission for the larger society. We have the audacity to hope that, as Wesley and his Methodist colleagues shaped the cultural climate of eighteenth-century Britain for good, so might Christian leaders in the twenty-first century offer to our society today an infusion of redemptive hope.

MARGARET'S STORY

In spring 2018, after thirty years of a successful career as a professor, consultant, manager, and college administrator, I (Margaret), now in my second year as chief academic officer and provost at Wheaton College, took a deep look within myself and acknowledged I was not achieving the goals I had envisioned when I accepted the position. Instead, I was caught in the tyranny of the urgent, dealing with almost daily fires, hours upon hours of meetings, and a continuous stream of administrative tasks. I was struggling to find time to step outside my workload to make a difference.

However, it was not entirely surprising that I found myself focusing more on daily tasks than on promoting a vision for the academic division. That was my go-to method of leading, which had been successful in the past. Throughout my adult career, I had worked diligently, often outworking my colleagues to produce results that advanced the missions of the institutions where I had been employed. Consequently, I was frequently regarded as the go-to person when others needed tasks completed, assuming more and more responsibilities until I reached what I considered the pinnacle of academic success—my dream role as provost at my alma mater.

By that spring, I realized I could not be the kind of provost who made a difference—an actual leader rather than a paper-pushing administrator—simply



through hard work. There was already too much on my plate to effect change just by working harder. More importantly, I came to terms with the fact that my lifetime of hard work had masked my reluctance to confront the conflicts inherent in driving any type of change. In a moment of epiphany, I recognized that I had to muster the courage to fail if I wanted to succeed in providing the leadership I wanted for the institution. My willingness to work from this paradox—a willingness to risk failure in order to succeed—set me on a journey over the next few years to explore other tensions and paradoxes that would empower me to lead more effectively and teach me how to embrace my identity lightly enough to discern with God and others the appropriate time to pass my role on to the next provost.

But how to radically change my leadership style while continuing to work fifty to sixty hours a week? I turned to the familiar writings of leadership scholar and professor of management Robert Quinn, who has spent much of his career writing about leaders who were hit with some sort of failure yet emerged stronger—less ego-oriented and more focused on others and the mission of their organization.⁵ However, this time I wasn't teaching his material; instead, I was using it as a lifeline to find my way to be the leader I now imagined.

Quinn's books and classes on leadership stress that meaningful organizational change first requires deep transformational change in the leader. He writes that leaders who have experienced some sort of crisis while in their role are the best candidates for such change because they have already been knocked off their pedestal of what they thought success meant. In consulting with derailed leaders as well as teaching his MBA students, Quinn asks them to grapple with four questions to start them on the journey of change within themselves and their organization.

1. What result do I want to create?
2. Am I internally driven?
3. Am I other-focused?
4. Am I externally open?⁶

⁵See Robert E. Quinn, *Change the World: How Ordinary People Can Accomplish Extraordinary Results* (Jossey-Bass, 2000); Quinn, *Building the Bridge as You Walk on It: A Guide for Leading Change* (Jossey-Bass, 2004).

⁶Robert E. Quinn, *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within* (Jossey-Bass, 1996), 23-55.

For Quinn, leaders capable of deep change must possess a telos—a meaningful, long-term purpose for themselves and their organization—that transcends mere success or survival. This telos fosters a vision of the future that intrinsically drives leaders rather than external voices demanding what they see as the appropriate course of action. Motivated by purpose instead of ego, such leaders shift their focus from themselves to others, increasing their capacity to share power as the telos takes precedence over their anticipated results. In this quest to transform their organization with a meaningful purpose, they also recognize the importance of transforming themselves to be worthy of the ends they now pursue. They become externally open by developing the courage to admit they don't have all the answers and the vulnerability to accept personal feedback.

I had taught these four questions for years—four standalone slides in a PowerPoint deck on leadership. But now, reflecting on the changes I wanted to make in my own leadership, I realized they weren't quite so linear. You couldn't answer one and move on to the next; they doubled back on each other, fed each other, and at times were in conflict. Fear is a natural part of courage; vulnerability requires trust in others; organizational flourishing might necessitate layoffs; too much reliance on friendships in the workplace can hinder empowering others; driving change often demands relinquishing control. I came to understand personally a topic I was increasingly seeing in the scholarly work on leadership—given the complexities of organizational life, the tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes found in the job had to be tended to and cultivated rather than solved to lead well.

Quinn emphasizes in all his writings that leaders who operate from these four questions are rare; it requires a great deal of vulnerable courage to step outside the normal expectations placed on leaders. So it's no surprise that I had difficulty finding a modern example of someone who exemplifies this deeply transformational leadership. Yet I wanted a mentor—someone who was a modern Christian, either alive or part of the great cloud of witnesses—who could model in depth the paradoxical leadership I was looking for. Where were the brothers and sisters in Christ who had failed miserably yet who came back deeply committed to their spiritual life and a telos grounded in God's redeeming kingdom work, whose ability to drive deep change in others as well themselves led people to Christ and transformed the world around them?

Obviously, there was not a broad pool of candidates. However, I recalled a book by Paul Wesley Chilcote titled *Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision*, in which he writes about the tensions and paradoxes John and Charles Wesley navigated while shaping their ministry and the Methodist communities they founded. Upon revisiting it, I recognized anew how the Wesley brothers balanced a Christian life that encompassed both “faith and works,” “word and spirit,” “piety and mercy,” “the timelessness of Christ and the timeliness of culture,” and “personal and social holiness,” as just a few of the tensions they engaged with rather than attempted to resolve.⁷

As a Free Methodist, I had always found John Wesley a bit of an enigma. Not his writings—especially his writings on grace, which had changed the trajectory of my spiritual formation—but his life itself. He was a young Oxford scholar who took on spiritual adventure in the New World, only to return a failure. He was a reformer who wanted people to own their faith, so he created structured methods for them to follow. He was a preacher loath to speak in front of large crowds, yet he preached atop his father’s grave.

As I reflected on what I had always regarded as inconsistencies in John Wesley’s life, rereading Chilcote’s book helped me recognize they were not so much infuriating as indicative of someone who had navigated the tensions, conflicts, and paradoxes of leadership that Robert Quinn was describing two hundred years after Wesley’s death. Wesley was centered—or internally focused, to use Quinn’s term—in the tension of two truths: humanity’s brokenness and the potency of God’s grace. Chilcote explains that Wesley embraced this tension because he believed that God’s grace, initiated by God, is fundamentally relational, aimed at healing and restoring God’s image in our life and community. Chilcote articulates Wesley’s viewpoint this way: “When our loves are rooted in Christ (the foundation of faith), then God’s own love becomes real and vital, hallowed by our efforts to live like Christ in every way (the goal of perfect love).”⁸

This process of reciprocity nurtures the sanctifying tension between grace and works, justification and sanctification, and personal piety and mercy toward others, which, as Chilcote observes, can be summed up as the relationship between “Christ-crucified-for-us” and “Christ-victorious-in-us.”⁹

⁷Paul Wesley Chilcote, *Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision: An Introduction to the Faith of John and Charles Wesley* (InterVarsity Press, 2004).

⁸Chilcote, *Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision*, 29.

⁹Chilcote, *Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision*, 29.

Wesleyan theologian Randy Maddox writes about Wesley living out this tension for between faith and works, calling it “responsible grace” and noting, “In Wesley’s work [there is] an abiding concern to preserve the vital tension between two truths that he viewed as co-definitive of Christianity: without God’s grace, we *cannot* be saved; while without our (grace-empowered, but uncoerced) participation, God’s grace *will not save*.”¹⁰

But it wasn’t just his theology. Wesley took a both/and approach to much of his leadership. His life was characterized, as Chilcote writes, “by a winsome synthesis of knowledge and piety, intellectual rigor and disciplined zeal.”¹¹ His biographer, Henry Rack, captures this by calling Wesley a “reasonable enthusiast” who worked through the paradoxes and inconsistencies of modernity with the ancient Christian faith.¹²

But paradoxes and tensions are not just part of modernity; they are found throughout Scripture.

- Jesus humbles himself to be exalted by God (Phil 2:5-11).
- Jesus teaches through paradoxes:
 - “The last will be first, and the first will be last” (Mt 20:16).
 - “The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (Mt 23:11-12).
 - “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” (Mk 8:35-36).
- Paul tells the Corinthians that in his weakness, God’s grace is sufficient for him, “for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).
- James writes, “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy” (Jas 1:2).¹³

¹⁰Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Kingswood Books, 1994), 19.

¹¹Chilcote, *Recapturing the Wesleys’ Vision*, 76.

¹²Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Trinity Press International, 1989).

¹³For these and other biblical paradoxes, see Matthew L. Sheep, “Where We Might Least Expect to Find It: Organizing Paradoxes of Christian Theology in a Society of Organizations,” in *Interdisciplinary Dialogues on Organizational Paradox: Learning from Belief and Science, Part A*, ed.

Robert Quinn, John Wesley, and a close reading of the paradoxes in Scripture helped me realize that tensions and paradoxes are normal in leadership. Their writings inspired me with the courage and a blueprint to lead from my faith in God and what I understood as his calling, rather than what I thought would be ways to bring God glory through my own avenues of excellence. They helped me find the courage to embrace the possibility of failure without viewing myself as one. Each instilled in me a hope that was not empty optimism but was grounded in God's promises of a redeemed kingdom, not yet perfected, where all are invited to flourish, fulfilling Jesus' promise of an abundant life.

The busyness did not slow down, but I began to take risks by expanding faculty leadership opportunities in my cabinet and reorganizing the structure of the college and graduate school's academic divisions. I encouraged each direct report to generate ideas for innovation grounded in Wheaton's mission, viewing my role as prospering their way into making those ideas a reality. I envisioned an academically based, experiential student leadership program that would train students in urban economic development from a Christian perspective, and I entrusted its development to another capable faculty member. I collaborated with deans to restructure the graduate school. I encouraged graduate programs to adopt hybrid models, extending Wheaton's reach and promoting the launch of new programs that aligned with the college's mission.

There was one other change occurring that I didn't quite realize at the time. My spiritual life—how I was being formed in Christ—was being shaped by my new, intentional approach to leadership as I relied more on God and less on my knowledge, strengths, and abilities to navigate this season. In a very Wesleyan fashion, my works, dependent on God's grace, were shaping my sanctification. When centered in God's telos, I came to realize that leadership becomes another means for God to mold us into his likeness.

SHIRLEY'S STORY

In 2005, I (Shirley) was contentedly ensconced in my role as chief academic officer at Westmont College, where I had been a history professor since the

Rebecca Bednarek, Miguel Pina e Cunha, Jonathan Schad, and Wendy K. Smith (Emerald, 2021), 75-93.

mid-1980s. I was planning to return to the classroom as soon as possible. I had no intention of staying in administration for the rest of my vocational journey. The last thing on my mind was a presidency.

Then, in spring 2005, the chair of the presidential search committee at my alma mater, Houghton College, called to inquire about my potential interest in applying to succeed the current president, who was retiring after thirty years. I did not even stop to ponder the invitation. “No thanks” came quickly, easily, and decisively. Over the next twelve months, through a difficult and convoluted journey that was frustrating for everyone involved, it became clear to me that returning to my alma mater as the next president was exactly what I needed to do. By the time that clarity emerged, I had managed to create puzzlement and sometimes even irritation among people at both Westmont and Houghton who surely must have assumed that this person simply could not make up her mind. (As someone who had already demonstrated the ability in my leadership to make tough decisions, this situation was humbling to say the least.)

It would be challenging, and quite unnecessary in this context, to describe the inner turmoil of coming to accept an unwelcome invitation that many viewed as a promotion. For me, it meant leaving an institution where I was being told by key leaders that I was needed more than ever, as well as the comfort of a community that had been home to me for twenty-three years. Throughout the complicated year of discernment, a persistent pull toward Houghton was the sense of gratitude for my Wesleyan heritage—embodied for me by my grandparents, who had served that tradition as pastors and administrators. I felt a vague sense that part of me was not finding expression in my current work, though I was not able to put words to that feeling until much later. Paradoxically, it seemed at the time that I was being asked to surrender the very life for which Houghton had prepared me so well. Thus it was, that, amid the words of celebration and congratulation I was receiving for this new opportunity, I was experiencing primarily a sense of loss—albeit loss in the context of the long-delayed gift of clarity that this was the road of obedience for me.

One day in late spring 2006, as I was slowly adjusting my mental and emotional sight in the direction of my new assignment, I received an unexpected phone call from an elder statesman in Christian higher education, whose

career had included seasons of service at both Houghton and Westmont. He congratulated me on my new appointment and then quickly shifted to a more somber tone. “You know, Shirley, the presidency involves a dying. I just wanted to make you aware of what you are taking on.” It was a strange call in some ways, given that I really did not know the person that well. But given the journey toward the assignment, I felt I already had a taste of what he was warning me about. I responded, “Yes, I know that. I already feel it.” The caller seemed somewhat surprised. It was, frankly, a gift to have my current feelings validated by a wise and experienced leader.

I certainly did not understand on that spring day prior to actually moving into the presidency the full weight of the sage and prophetic word that had been delivered to me. But I came to feel that reality almost immediately upon taking up my responsibilities. I soon learned that several members internal to the community had aspired to the presidency and believed they were better qualified for the position than someone coming from outside the institution. Furthermore, they all seemed to have clear ideas of what they would have done with what they assumed to be the limitless power of the presidency.

Over the course of the first year, the initial welcoming aura of euphoria dissipated, revealing a community deeply divided within itself. It was torn between a sense of loyalty to the past, and to what had made the college the high-quality institution it was, and a gnawing sense of fear-filled anxiety that it might have to change to be ready for the future. In the community’s ethos, this showed itself as a paradoxical mix of confidence bordering on complacency and self-abnegating insecurity. (Whenever I shared this analysis of the culture, there were nods of recognition, so I don’t believe I was off-base in this assessment.) Even among those who saw the need for change, every party had a different idea of what needed to change and fully expected the new president to see the wisdom of their particular plan and to use the full leverage of her office to get behind that plan. Everyone seemed to want the new president to “straighten out ‘those people’” who saw things differently from themselves.

Thus it was that, at the very moment when others were seeing the position as powerful and able to effect change almost magically, I was experiencing the position as the most humbling and vulnerable situation I had ever been in. There was little acknowledgment of the standard challenges typical of organizational transition after a long-tenured leader. (It was as if the last transition

was so long ago that no one remembered!) Fortunately, as a historian, I was somewhat acquainted with the dynamics of leadership transition and had some idea of what to expect. To make it even more challenging, there was no onboarding plan or even the suggestion of the possibility of an executive coach—and again, thirty years ago, that would not have been expected. There was simply the clear expectation from trustees, faculty, and staff alike that, as the new president, I could bring about the restoration of the institution’s glory days in the context of the twenty-first century without the pain of change. I found out quickly that I was on my own to figure this out.

Amid this, I was simultaneously realizing I had made some assumptions about the situation that were not turning out as I had expected. At Westmont, I had moved into administration after nearly two decades of serving on the faculty, during which time I had earned the respect of colleagues as a competent and trustworthy person. That credibility did not translate to Houghton. At Houghton, I was an administrator who had been dropped in from outside. Positions by themselves are no substitute for the network of collegial connection that is so critical to the depth of trust required to mediate difficult decisions in times of organizational transition. To make things even more complicated, I had long-standing connections in the college community that meant I was not beginning as a new leader with a clean slate. I was the daughter of a longtime faculty member who was still living locally. My brother and his family were still in the community and involved in both the local school and church. Furthermore, I had gone to both high school and college in the community. Sometimes it felt as if there were unwritten assumptions that, as a “local girl,” I would be easy to manage, or at least that I would be empathetic to everyone and ensure that no one suffered in the process of change.

As I began to ask questions that would be expected of any leader in a new institution, and especially after a thirty-year presidency, it became clear to me that even my questions were being viewed as intrusive and presumptuous. How can this outsider dare to come in and ask us about what we are doing? The word started coming back to me that I was being “tyrannical” and “top-down”—words that had never been applied to me before. After a certain period of agonizing soul-searching, I began to sense that, at some level, key members of the community—and especially certain sections of the faculty—felt they had been betrayed. I had not turned out to be what they expected.



It was the only emotion that could possibly describe the level of intensity and animosity directed toward me in both words and actions. There were anonymous notes, rumors, and assumptions about what the president “might” do or what I “really” thought, regardless of what I had actually said. The painfully uncomfortable combination of simultaneously being assumed to be known and safe but also an intrusive outsider had created a situation in which I felt the need to go deeper into an understanding of the history of the institutional mission.

In this context I began to study the college’s heritage and its founding in 1883 amid the revivals that were sweeping over the Southern Tier of New York state in the late nineteenth century, and the close links between this revivalist spirit and the reforming social zeal that characterized the college’s sponsoring denomination. The Wesleyan Methodists had separated from the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1843 over such issues as abolition of slavery, hierarchy in the church as pertaining both to lay-clergy relationships and to the role of women, the use of alcohol, and membership in secret societies. In exploring the roots of Houghton, I realized immediately how different its founding narrative was from the standard evangelical story of Christian higher education.

Given that it was founded prior to the fundamentalist-modernist split in early twentieth-century American religious history, there was no insecurity about the authority of Scripture and thus no discussion in its founding documents about inerrancy. There was also no sense of the need to choose between loyalty to Scripture and the concerns of social reform. The college had been established precisely to prepare financially needy students with the tools of learning so they could leave the ivory tower of the academy and go out into the world—and, empowered by the Holy Spirit, address the needs of the whole person. This included physical needs, intellectual needs, spiritual needs, and even the need for beauty. The founder, Willard J. Houghton, used to sign his letters, “Yours for fixing up the world.” The school saw theoretical knowledge as valuable primarily for its practical impact. Yes, the life of the mind was important, but not for its own sake. It should lead one to translate cognitive knowledge into practical improvement in the community. There was also no apparent tension between the claims of faith and the claims of science. Fortunately, the polarizing impact of the Scopes trial in 1925 seemed to have bypassed Houghton.

I realized as a new president that the very peculiarities of the Wesleyan heritage had positioned the institution ideally to prepare graduates of generous hospitality and mediators of truth and grace in the polarized world of the twenty-first century. So yes, there was a dying in this role—no question—but there was also the hope of resurrection as I came to see that the institution's own story provided the most compelling guidance for making the strategic transition into this new season. My job as president was to tell that story. In this realization, I found courage, clarity, and freedom to surrender to God's providence in inviting me to this position and to embrace the tensions of this particular season of calling. I had been led beyond the limitations imposed by the need for others' approval and was called in the strength of the Holy Spirit to invite the entire community, both my supporters and my detractors, to become part of the next chapter of Houghton's story.

SUMMARY

Both of us found Wesley and the Wesleyan tradition to be more than part of history. Wesley's life and thought provided an animating vision that transformed our own journey. Wesley became our teacher, inspiring in us an approach to leadership that sustained us and overflowed in benefits to the communities we served.

This book has a different starting place from most books on leadership. Rather than assuming that failure and frustration are the end of effective leadership, it asserts that these may be the most promising beginning.

Leadership is not all about the successful leader. It is about the dynamic relationship between an effective leader and a flourishing organization, recognizing that just as God uses leaders to be agents of providential purposes in an organization, so God uses the leadership context itself to invite spiritual formation in the leader.

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This book offers a unitary picture of leadership grounded in a virtuous cycle of surrender, stewardship, and servanthood—fraught throughout with tension



and paradox. Surprisingly, it argues that the tensions and paradoxes are not aspects of leadership to be managed away but are central to navigating any mature and enduring context of effective leadership.

It also offers an interdisciplinary perspective on leadership, shaped by the professional background of its coauthors. It is informed by our experience as leaders in various settings, both inside and outside the Christian context, and by our collective academic training in organizational psychology, history, and philosophy.

In summary, we present a countercultural vision, supported by the latest contemporary research on leadership, informed by the personal and professional journey of the two authors, illuminated at every turn by surprisingly relevant insights drawn from the life and work of John Wesley. It is easy for those of us in the twenty-first century to be guilty of a kind of chronological triumphalism—assuming we have moved beyond all that has gone before us in the historical process, or perhaps, if we have heard of certain historical figures, assuming we know them and what they have to offer.

In offering this book, we invite you to join the conversation we have been having for the past three years about how our leadership and spiritual formation are influenced by the life, writings, and legacy of John Wesley. We trust that in reading the book, your own leadership, like ours, will be energized and renewed by a deeper exploration of this rich and unexpected eighteenth-century treasure and its relevance for the challenges of the twenty-first century.

LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

1. Leadership begins from the inside out.

Sustainable leadership flows from inner spiritual formation.

2. Organizational transformation begins with transformation in leaders.

Meaningful institutional change is possible only when leaders themselves are willing to be changed—spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually.

3. Paradox is not a problem to solve but a tension to steward.

Wesley's paradoxes of faith and works, grace and responsibility, piety and mercy remind leaders that maturity lies in embracing, not eliminating, tension.



4. Leadership is a means of sanctification.

Leadership, when centered in God's purposes, becomes a context for the leader's own spiritual growth—another means of grace shaping character and dependence on God.

5. Hope is the sustaining virtue of faithful leadership.

Like Wesley's own transformation at Aldersgate, hope enables leaders to persevere through paradoxes, trusting that God's redemptive purposes are at work even amid uncertainty.

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